THE UNOFFICIAL STORY

POP'S PUNK SUPERSTARS

Blondie

▶ Their Songs ▶ Their Style ▶ Their Influence

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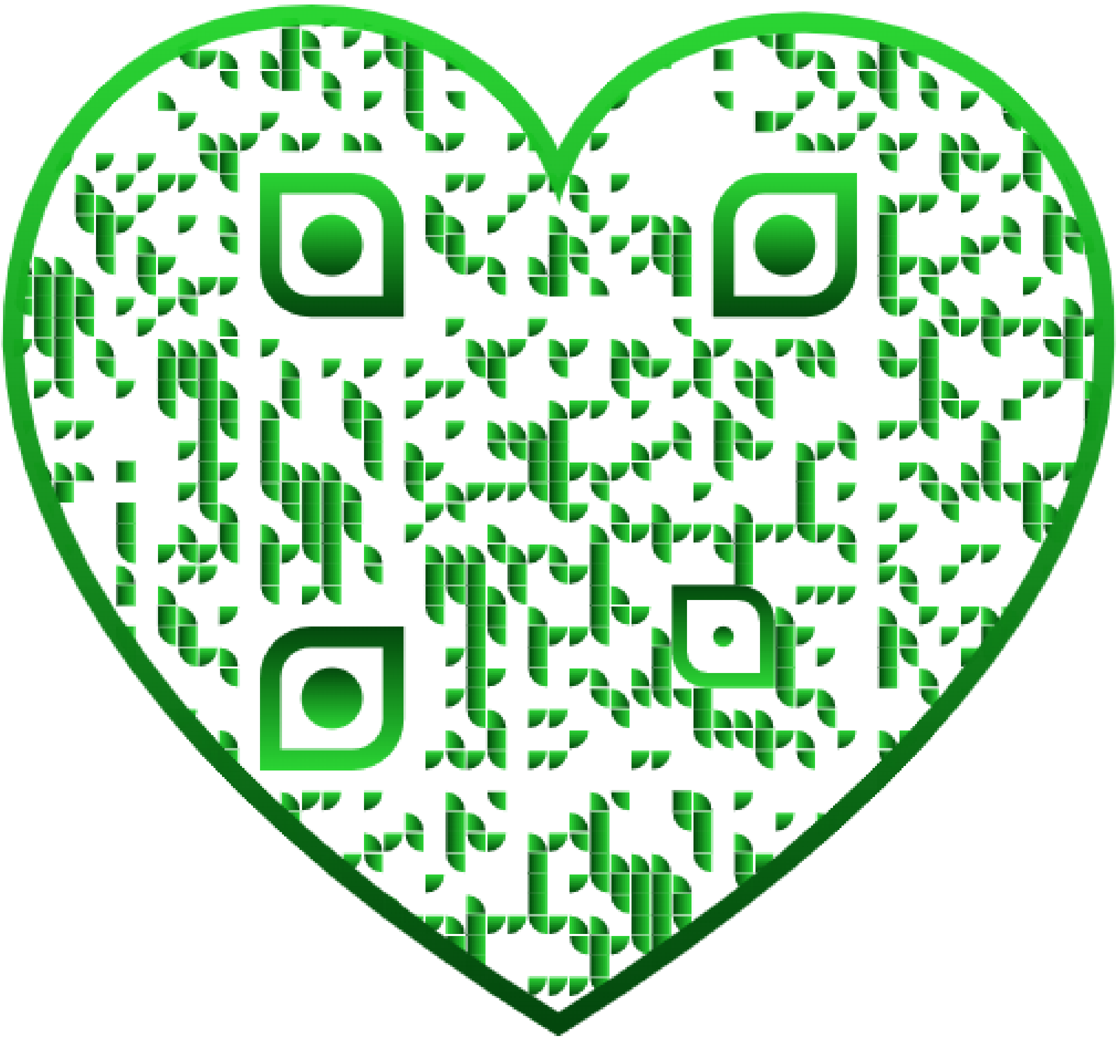
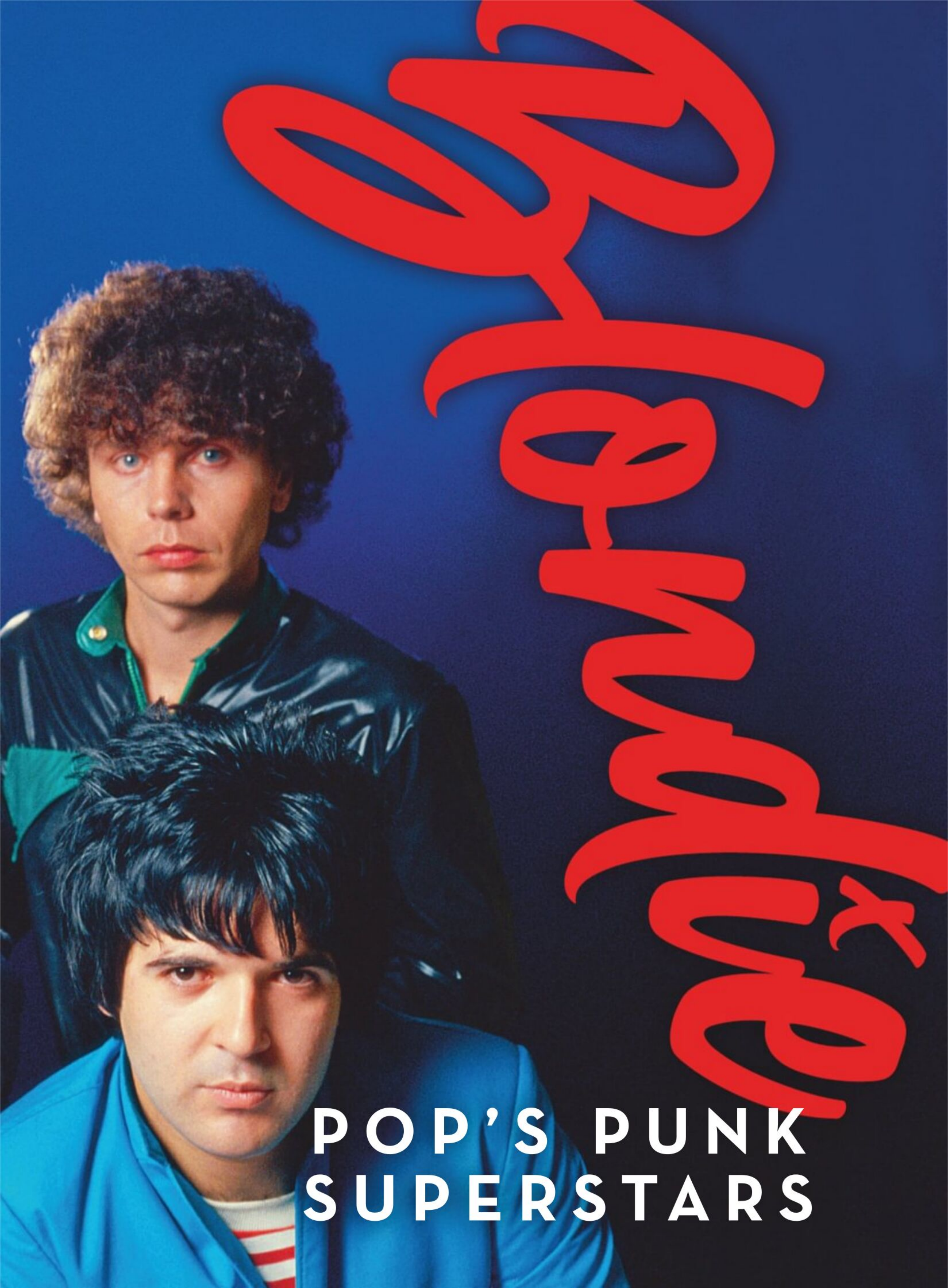
THE STORY OF BLONDIE



Blondie epitomized glam in the late '70s (clockwise from left): Chris Stein, Debbie Harry, Nigel Harrison, Clem Burke, Frank Infante and Jimmy Destri.



Blondie

POP'S PUNK SUPERSTARS

Contents

6
CHAPTER 1
WHY WE LOVE BLONDIE
Defying genres, expectations and general pop decorum, the New York City rockers brought a gritty and glamorous new wave look and sound to the mainstream

20
CHAPTER 2
THE BUTTERFLY GETS ITS WINGS
As the personal relationship between Debbie Harry and Chris Stein grew, so did their musical aspirations, leading Blondie to a big record deal and global adoration

44
CHAPTER 3
PEAK POP DARLINGS
With the release of *Autoamerican* In 1980, Blondie topped the charts with world beats and rap. But individual pursuits would plant the seeds of discord

56
CHAPTER 4
DISBANDED AND REBRANDED
Money woes, squabbles among bandmates and Stein's declining health spelled doom for Blondie, but Harry's solo career still held promise

66
CHAPTER 5
BACK ON THE ROAD
By the start of the new century, the band had returned to the charts and would be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

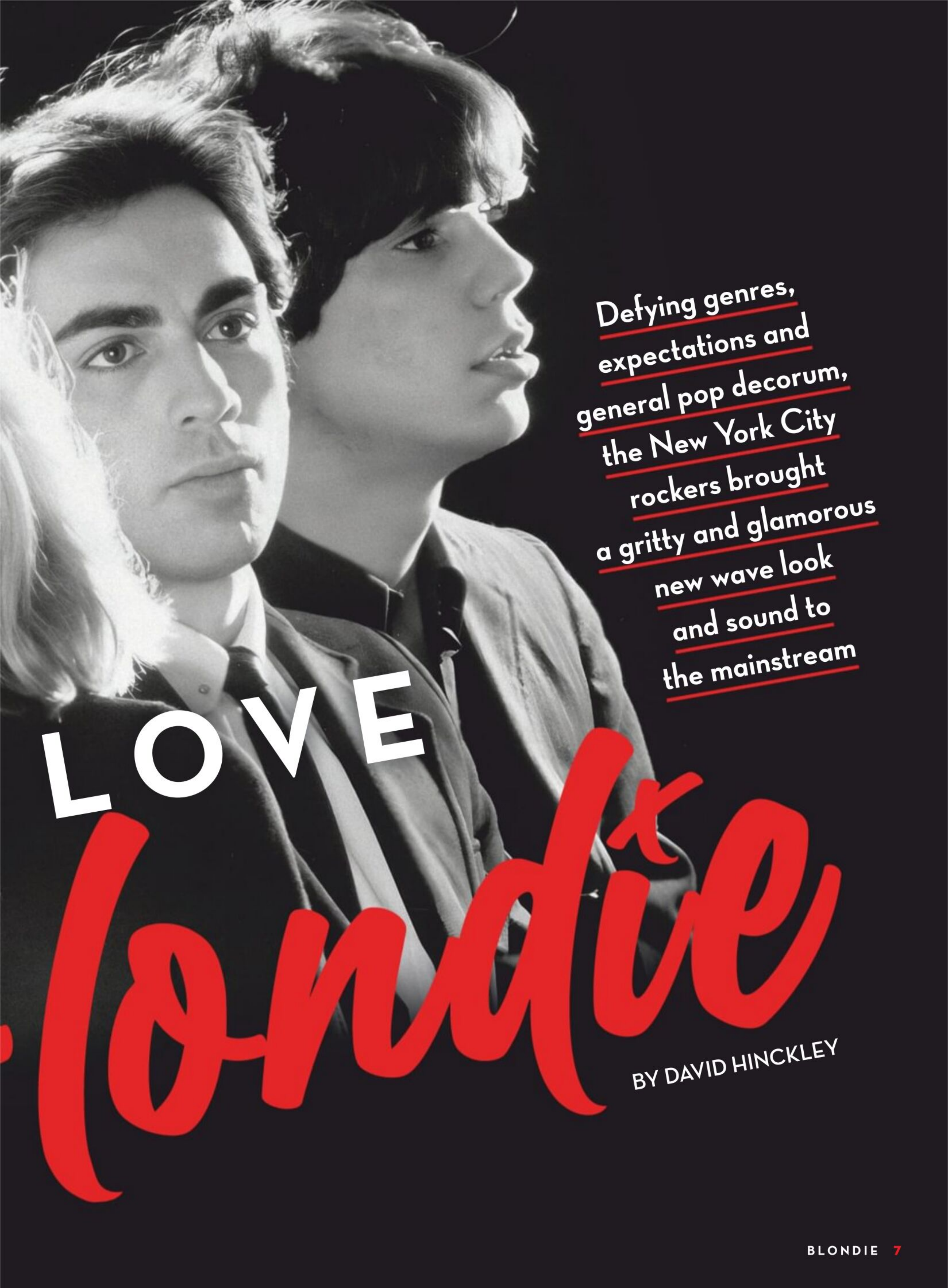
78
CHAPTER 6
REVIVED AND VIBRANT
From music festival stages to memoir pages, Blondie continues to inspire

86
CHAPTER 7
BLONDIE IN REVIEW
The 15 songs you must know to appreciate the legacy of the band

Debbie Harry, here in a London studio on March 8, 1978, filming the video for "(I'm Always Touched By Your) Presence, Dear," told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2020, "I guess I've got New York style; I like fitted clothes and very bright colors."

WHY WE B

The first incarnation of Blondie looked destined for success at a 1976 photo shoot for their self-titled debut album, released in December (from left): Gary Valentine, Clem Burke, Debbie Harry, Chris Stein and Jimmy Destri.



LOVE londie

Defying genres, expectations and general pop decorum, the New York City rockers brought a gritty and glamorous new wave look and sound to the mainstream

BY DAVID HINCKLEY

Blondie rocked the Paradiso in Amsterdam on Nov. 19, 1977, one of a handful of early European dates. "We flew back home with a stack of great reviews and new fans and got straight to work on our second album, *Plastic Letters*," Harry recalled in her 2019 memoir, *Face It*.

IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND why the image of punk rock — the 1970s genre hatched in tiny claustrophobic clubs that ultimately helped reshape popular music — often defaults to a band like the Sex Pistols, whose ragged appearance and scorched-earth howls suggested the world was drowning in its own chaos.

The image gets your attention. It does not explain Blondie.

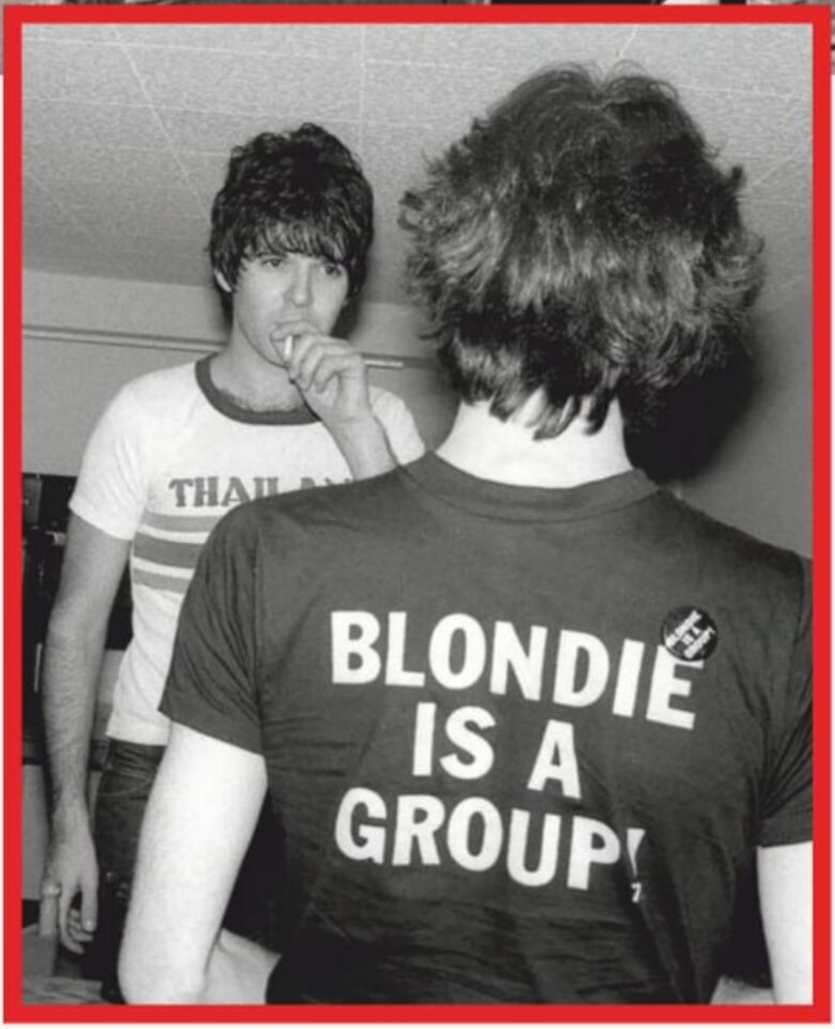
One of the first '70s underground bands to crash the mainstream, Blondie still sparks lively debates over whether they can be labeled "punk." Their music clearly incubated in the punk scene of New York's CBGB and Max's Kansas City, and their early songs honored the loose punk ethos of defying the bland, safe productions that largely populated the prevailing playlists of the day. But over time, it became clear that Blondie's common ground with punk lay more in their skill at taking familiar musical styles and reshaping them in a way that made them feel new. ▶

Talk about potty humor: The band had a laugh in the bathroom of San Francisco's Mabuhay Gardens in May 1978.

"You know when you hear a good band — they have their own sound. Which I think we somehow achieved."

— *DEBBIE HARRY*

Two years before Blondie released "Call Me" in 1980, the band dialed up this photo shoot with Infante, Burke and Destri in the phone booth, Stein on the side, Harrison in front and Harry holding the receiver. In 1977 (below), Stein sported an unofficial motto while Burke looked on.



Lines from their 1980 smash "The Tide Is High" — "Every girl wants you to be her man / But I'll wait my dear 'til it's my turn / I'm not the kinda girl / Who gives up just like that" — could have been delivered in the 1950s by a demure, starry-eyed teen in a ponytail, poodle skirt and cardigan sweater sighing over the captain of the high school football team. But sung by Debbie Harry, accompanied by a seductive Jamaican rhythm and strings that float like a tropical breeze, those lyrics become a declaration of confidence. She knows what she wants. She's going to get it.

The real challenge lies in pinning any label at all on Blondie, whose first notable single in 1976, the hard-edged "X Offender," was backed on the B-side with the purring "In The Flesh." While they were castigated by the subterranean rock world for the disco beats in 1979's "Heart of Glass," the more salient point is that they topped the mainstream pop charts on their own terms.

The stars came out in the daytime at Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles in March 1977 (from left): Destri, Harry, Burke, Harrison and Stein. "The skirt was a vintage dress where the top completely rotted so I just salvaged the skirt," Harry told *DuJour* magazine. "I still try to make at least one thing for every tour."

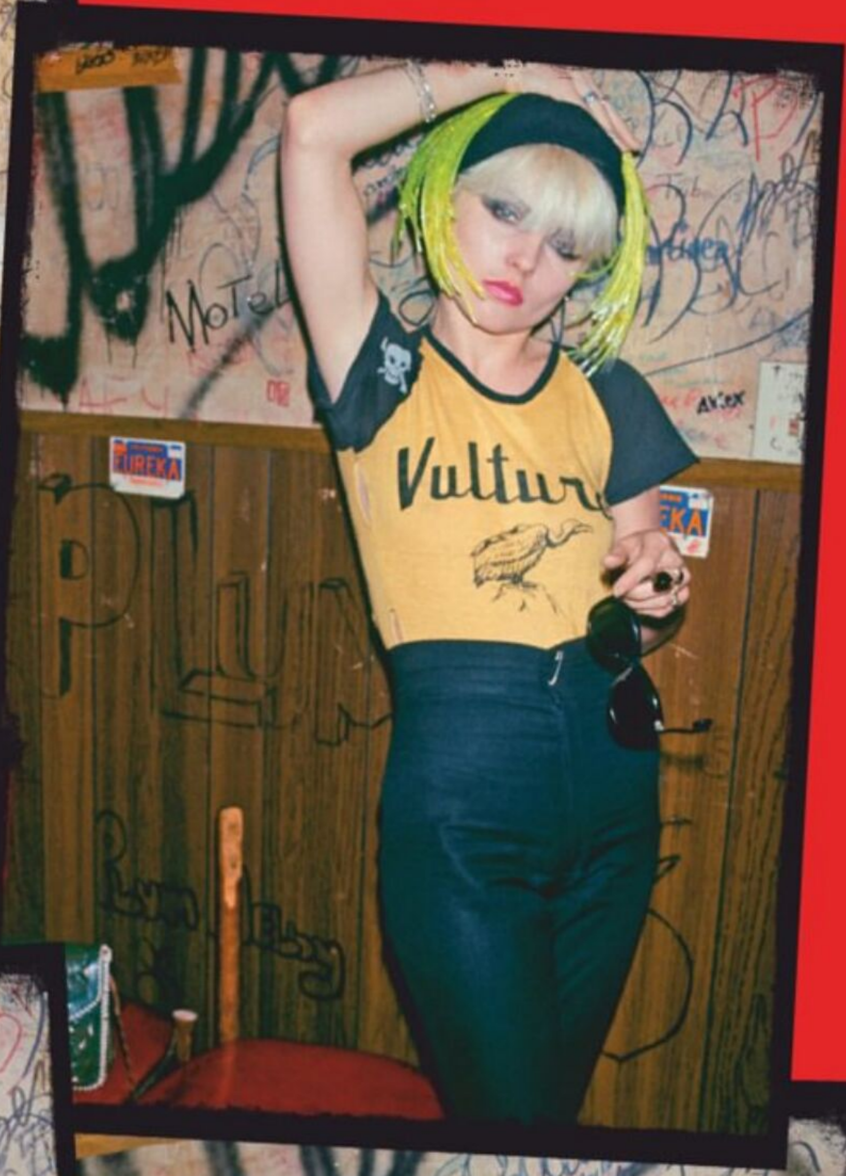
Blondie pulled music from all over the map, reworking the sweet 1963 Randy & the Rainbows doo-wop hit "Denise" as a French-inflected "Denis" with a cheeky rock edge, and enthusiastically embracing rap music with "Rapture." Chris Stein's guitar, Clem Burke's drums and Jimmy Destri's keyboard behind Harry's singular vocals — supported along the way by musicians such as bassists Gary Armstrong and Nigel Harrison and guitarist Frank Infante — created distinctively modern records that could incorporate a roots rockabilly riff as comfortably as a hip-hop scratch.

While Harry was the face and avatar of Blondie, Destri's experimentation with synthesizers formed much of the musical foundation that caught the ears of both fans and artists from Madonna and INXS to the Eurythmics and Lady Gaga. Along the way, Blondie also helped elevate music videos into an art form — or at least a required marketing tool. Two years before MTV launched in August 1981, they released their *Eat to the Beat* album as a record and then a video package. It also didn't hurt that Blondie had an actual blonde — well, an actual peroxide blonde — out front. Give us Debbie Harry plus a rich buffet of classic pop music spiced with fresh flavors, and we're still lining up almost half a century later.

However you define Blondie, in these pages, we'll track how their sound and image came together, and how, one way or another, they're gonna get ya, get ya, get ya, get ya.

Harry, in an impromptu shoot backstage at L.A. club Whisky a Go Go circa 1978, deconstructed this look for *DuJour*, noting that the shirt was a gift from one of Stein's friends and that the skull and bones was an iron-on. "Those were my favorite black toreador straight-leg pants. I think they were cotton with a high waistband, really hot, good-looking pants," she added. "The little beret was dedicated to two of my favorite images: Patty Hearst when she was Tania and Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde*."

Vulture
EUREKA
MOTELS


Vulture
EUREKA

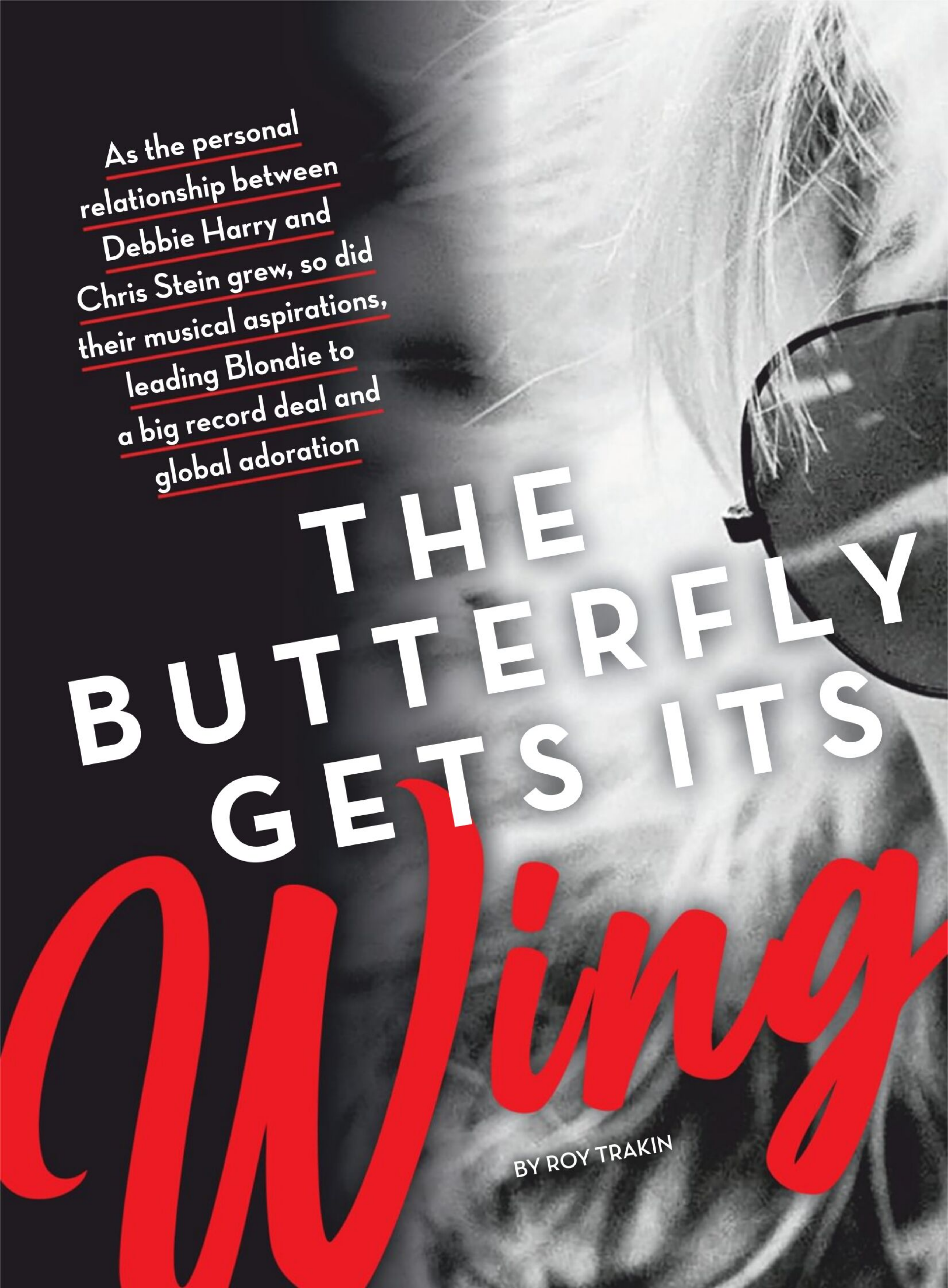
Vulture
EUREKA
MOTELS

While the guys seemed dressed up in this portrait session at Bel-Air Sands Hotel in 1977, Harry told *DuJour* her top was just "a rotten old basketball shirt. I just liked the name Starliners. Just a real gem, a great piece."

Harry and the band — (from left) Infante, Destri, Harrison, Burke and Stein — hung out in Tokyo in January 1978. In her memoir, *Face It*, Harry said that when a cab driver there responded positively to the Nerves' song "Hanging on the Telephone," which she and Stein were playing on a cassette in the backseat, that convinced them to record it as a cover.

“No one really paid attention to Debbie’s singing style and how great a writer she was, because they couldn’t get past the image.”

– JIMMY DESTRI



As the personal relationship between Debbie Harry and Chris Stein grew, so did their musical aspirations, leading Blondie to a big record deal and global adoration

THE BUTTERFLY GETS ITS *Wing*

BY ROY TRAKIN

Stein (seen in the reflection) posted this image on Instagram in July 2021 to wish Harry a happy birthday. He wrote, "As best as I can remember this was taken in a parking lot in Philadelphia to or from a gig probably 1979 (opening for Rush at the Spectrum)."

ANGELA TRIMBLE WAS BORN IN Miami, Florida, on July 1, 1945. Three months later, her musician birth mother gave her up for adoption to Richard and Catherine "Cag" Harry, a no-frills couple from Hawthorne, New Jersey. Renamed Deborah, Harry did well in school, but dreamed of becoming like her idol, Marilyn Monroe, and living an artist's life in New York City.

In 1965, she graduated with an Associate of Arts degree from Centenary, a junior college in Hackettstown, New Jersey, less than an hour's drive from home, but eventually ditched suburbia to move to the Big Apple, renting a $67-a-month East Village apartment. She promptly took jobs selling candles, working as a secretary for the BBC, waiting tables at Max's Kansas City nightclub and earning tips as a Playboy bunny. Although I started to cover Harry's music in the next decade, I remember the excitement of this place and time, filled with dreams and experimentation. "We all wanted to be part of it," Cyndi Lauper told *The New York Times* in 2019 of the burgeoning arts scene then. "Debbie led the pack. She had so many setbacks, and she just kept going." Before long, Harry wound up playing acoustic guitar and tambourine in a late-1960s psychedelic folk band, The Wind in the Willows.

Harry first met Christopher Stein, a Brooklyn-born music fan and talented photographer, when she played a small bar in New York City sometime after he had graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 1973. She was a member of The Stillettoes, a cabaret- and R&B-influenced pre-punk girl group formed by Elda Gentile. The band also played gigs at CBGB, a Bowery dive (and one-time biker bar). The owner, Hilly Kristal, had the idea to book local musical talent, which turned it into a home for the likes of the Ramones, Talking Heads, Television, and Patti Smith. "When we were doing The Stillettoes, we were being as sexy as possible at that time," Harry told *Attitude* magazine in 2022. "And flirty. A lot of flirting going on, which was fun." When he first saw Harry on stage, Stein later admitted, "I was very taken with her."

"She was always beautiful," Cag Harry told *Rolling Stone* in June 1979 about her daughter, Debbie (as a child, above, and in a Hawthorne High School yearbook photo, right, circa early 1960s). So much so, Cag once considered sending in her photo as a candidate to be a Gerber Baby. As for young Stein, he posted a Coney Island photo booth picture of him and his father, Ben, on Instagram in November 2018 (above, right). "He died in 1965, missed seeing a lot of stuff," Stein wrote in part. "He did really like early Bob Dylan though."

The feeling was mutual. Soon, Stein was enlisted to join the group, as was drummer Billy O'Connor. When only the core female trio was offered a label deal, Stein and Harry, along with O'Connor and bassist Fred Smith, left to form Angel and the Snake. Later, when Ivan Kral — who would eventually become part of the Patti Smith Group — joined on guitar, they would be complete under a new name: Blondie. "I was just walking across Houston Street and all these truck drivers were... just yelling, 'Blondie! Blondie! Hey Blondie,'" Harry told a British TV host in 1999. "I thought, 'Oh. OK. That's a good name.'"

"I lasted eight or nine months at the Playboy Club..." Harry (here, circa 1970) wrote in *Face It*, "and then I turned in my corset, collar, ears, and tail. They don't let you keep your costume. And that was that."

Harry and Stein bonded not just as bandmates but as romantic partners, with Stein's low-key, no-frills style a welcome counterpart to Harry's leather jacket, ripped T-shirt and tights. Add to that her bleach-blond hair and plenty of eyeliner, and Stein found the look "rather disarming."

Musically, Blondie didn't sound like the Ramones' three-chord power rock, Talking Heads' minimalist art-pop or Television's intricate guitar jams. The fledgling band's admittedly raw musical talent — buttressed by auditions that added drummer Burke (replacing O'Connor), bassist Gary Valentine (who went to school with Burke in New Jersey) and Jimmy Destri on keyboards – took a back seat to Harry's tough but vulnerable punk pin-up queen, updating the Brill Building / Phil Spector "Wall of Sound" with a style all her own.

The band became a fixture on the local New York scene, recording a demo with Alan Betrock, the well-connected founder of *New York Rocker*, an influential fanzine that covered the emerging New Wave sound. Blondie signed to music business veteran Larry Uttal's Private Stock Records for their self-titled debut, released in December 1976, which was preceded by the cheeky, hook-filled single, "X Offender," produced by music business legend Richard Gottehrer. Yet overseas,

The first time Harry (above left, circa 1968) appeared on a record was with folk-rock band The Wind in the Willows (above), named after the children's book by Kenneth Grahame. "I sang lead on one song, 'Djini Judy,' but aside from that I was like wallpaper," Harry wrote, "something pretty to stand in the back in my hippie clothes and with my long brown hair parted in the middle, going 'Oooooo.'"

it was the single's international B-side, "In the Flesh," that became the band's first hit when Australian music TV program *Countdown* inadvertently played the video for it, reaching No. 2 there. Drummer Clem Burke later referred to the song, an anomaly in the band's punk-pop repertoire, as "a forerunner to the power ballad."

By 1977, Blondie had hit the road, along with David Bowie, opening for Iggy Pop in support of Pop's album, *The Idiot,* as well as touring Australia on their own later that year. The group then signed with U.K.-based indie label Chrysalis Records for their Gottehrer-produced sophomore album, *Plastic Letters*. Released in February 1978, it cracked the U.K. Top 10 while going to No. 72 in the U.S. and No. 64 in Australia. The first single, "Denis," reached No. 2 in the U.K., followed by "(I'm Always Touched by Your) Presence, Dear," which also hit the British Top 10. Guitarist Frank Infante was added to the lineup, with British bassist Nigel Harrison replacing Valentine, making the group a tight six-piece. During those years, Blondie "wasn't really solidly formed," Harry explained to *Vogue* in 2022. "We had a lot of changes in the membership. We were always changing and still discovering who we were."

Blondie's popularity abroad led them to work on their third studio album,

A mix of cabaret, glam rock and R&B captured the sound of The Stillettoes (left, circa 1973, with, from left: Amanda Jones, Billy O'Connor, Elda Gentile, Stein, Fred Smith and Harry). A year later, Stein, Harry, O'Connor and Smith split off to form Angel and the Snake, with Stein designing the flyer for their Aug, 31, 1974, gig at CBGB (above). Not long after, they performed as Blondie and the Banzai Babies in October 1974 with backup singers Tish and Snooky Bellomo (below). Of a 23-minute set at CBGB in January 1975, a *Variety* critic noted, "This act needs more work, but could develop." They first used the shortened name on their 1976 debut album.

Parallel Lines, with influential Australian producer Mike Chapman, best known in the U.S. as the co-writer of songs such as Pat Benatar's "Love Is a Battlefield," Toni Basil's "Mickey" and Tina Turner's "Better Be Good to Me." Still, eight months after its release in September 1978, the album seemed like a flop after the middling performance of its first two U.S. singles, "I'm Gonna Love You Too" (recorded by Buddy Holly in 1957) and Jack Lee's "Hanging on the Telephone" (which, however, had been a hit in Europe). And then came the disco-infused "Heart of Glass." Released as a 12-inch dance track in December 1978, the reaction was immediate, not just in New York hot spots like Studio 54, Xenon and Crisco Disco, but in the newly emerging punk-rock venues like Hurrah and the Mudd Club. Blondie had done the impossible: they brought the Uptown and Downtown music scenes together.

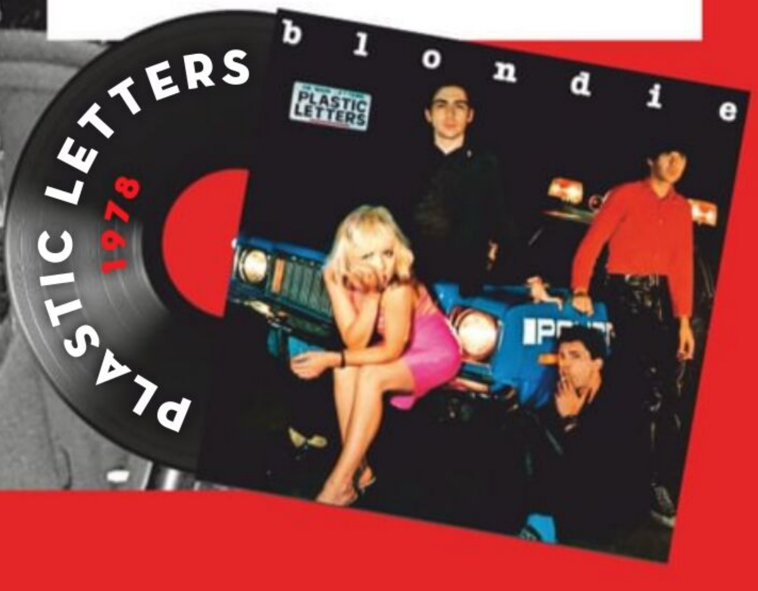
And when a radio version came out in January 1979, the whole country

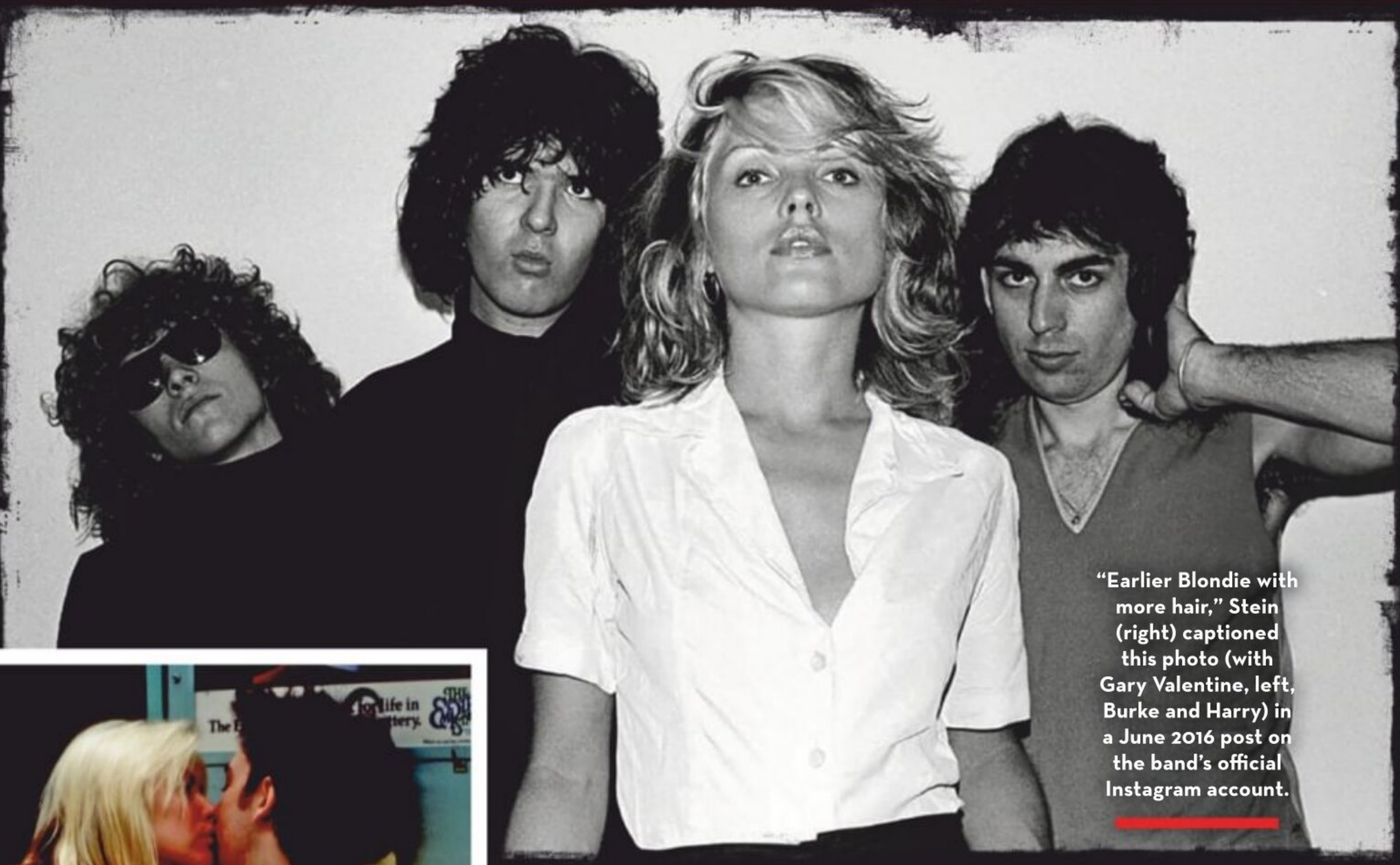
"I thought Debbie was amazing," Stein (here with Harry in 1976 outside Max's Kansas City in N.Y.C.) told *The Scotsman* in March 2020 of his impression of her when they first met. "I see aspects of her now that are still the same."

discovered its fresh groove. On April 28, 1979, "Heart of Glass" hit the top of the Billboard Hot 100, becoming Blondie's first No. 1 single. It was a success that had many of their hardcore punk adherents sniffing sell-out, and when I spoke with Chris Stein at the time, he was bitter about fair-weather friends and began to sour on the press. "Everything has changed in the last three months," he told me in a *SoHo Weekly News* interview in May 1979. "It's all undergone a completely weird boost, everything is just more hyper. We're under more strain and psychic pressure. People have surprised me by turning on us. I agree with [rock critic] Lester Bangs, the anti-disco bias has racist overtones."

Far from an overnight sensation, "Heart of Glass" had been written years before as a more rock and reggae-tinged track, but the final recorded version was inspired by Kraftwerk and the Bee Gees, according to drummer Burke, who gave credit for the synth work to keyboardist Destri. As I wrote in the *New York Rocker* at the time, "In the clever pop synthesis of rock, punk and disco that makes up this important record, Blondie leads the way for those otherwise disparate genres to cross-fertilize and inform one another." A fourth single, "One Way or Another," continued the momentum, rising to No. 24. *Parallel Lines* itself has since sold more than 20 million copies around the world.

Now with a national profile, Blondie appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in June 1979, photographed by Annie Leibovitz. Even so, to dissuade the public from thinking that the group ▶





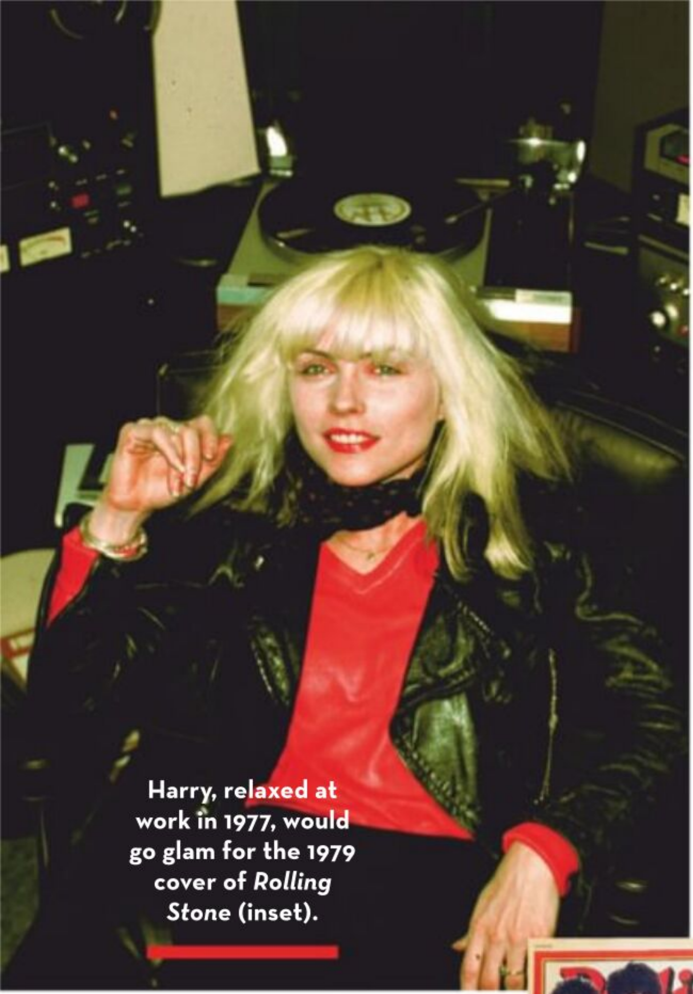
“Earlier Blondie with more hair,” Stein (right) captioned this photo (with Gary Valentine, left, Burke and Harry) in a June 2016 post on the band’s official Instagram account.

While Harry drummed away in the New York City office she and Stein rented with other bands in the mid-’70s, she and Stein set each other’s hearts aflutter in 1976 (inset).

"Debbie's charisma and creativity were very obvious to me... We were all New Yorkers fascinated with Warhol and all of that. It was all in the context of what Blondie was about."

— CLEM BURKE

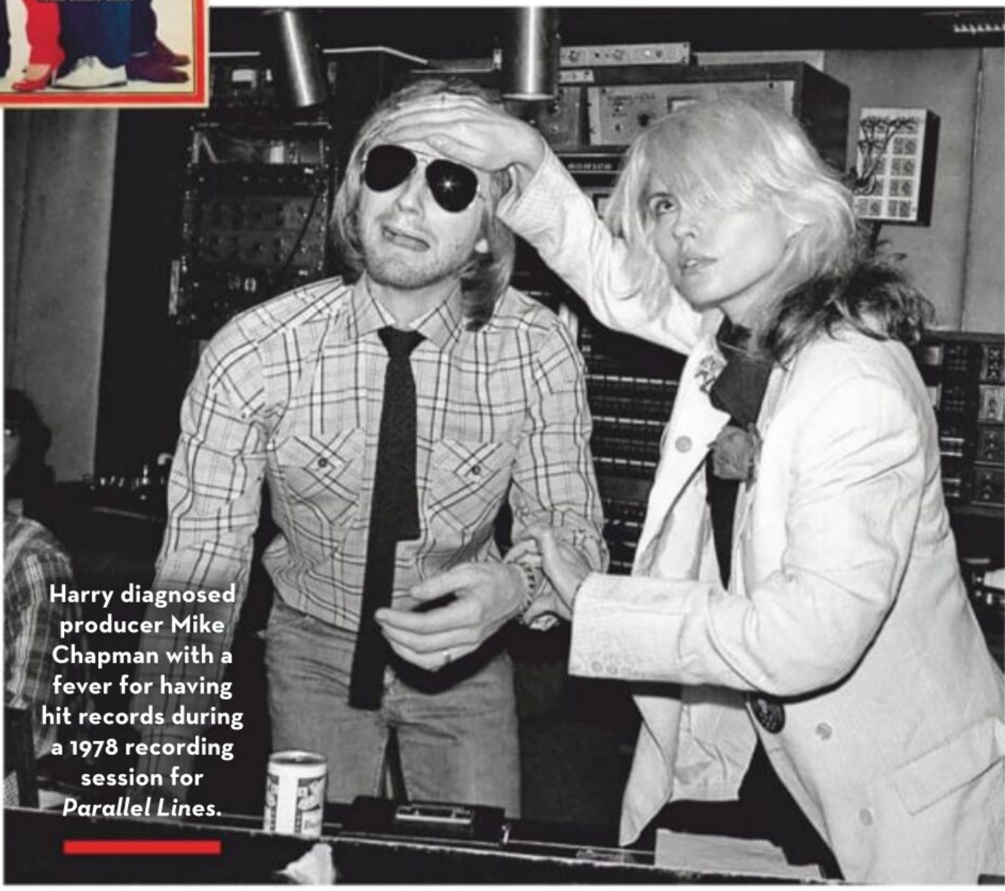
"It was a time of felt experience — no special effects, just raw, visceral, uncut living," Harry wrote in *Face It* of playing New York club CBGB in the '70s.


Harry, relaxed at work in 1977, would go glam for the 1979 cover of *Rolling Stone* (inset).

"When Chris is putting his books together, I say, 'How do you remember all this?'" Harry (here in 1979) told *The Scotsman* in 2020. "He says, 'Well, it's a little different when you have a photograph, to tickle your memory banks.'"

was named for the blond-haired Harry, lapel buttons distributed at the time declared "BLONDIE IS A GROUP." Toward the end of the year, they toured the U.S., U.K. and Europe, then entered the studio to record a fourth album, *Eat to the Beat,* which became another chart-topper in the U.K. and reached No. 9 in Australia and No. 17 in the U.S. The first single, "Dreaming," co-written by producer Chapman and featuring songwriting legend Ellie Greenwich singing background, was a disappointment in the U.S., peaking at No. 27.

Fortunes changed again with "Call Me." A collaboration with disco legend Giorgio Moroder, the single, written for the Richard Gere film, *American Gigolo*, spent six consecutive weeks at No. 1 in the U.S. and was Grammy-nominated for Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal. Blondie was seemingly on top of the world, with members of the band appearing in the film *Roadie* (1980) with Meat Loaf, performing Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire." Little did they realize that the flames would soon consume them.


Harry diagnosed producer Mike Chapman with a fever for having hit records during a 1978 recording session for *Parallel Lines.*

Destri, Burke, Harry, Stein and Valentine posed in a take not used on the album cover of *Blondie* (1976). Of joining the band, Burke told *Newsweek* in August 2022, "I knew the creativity was there."

Stein posted this photo to Instagram in October 2022 and wrote, "Gary, Clem, [our friend] Sable Starr and Debbie. First band trip to LA Feb 1977. This was the first time most of us had gone from a cold place to a nice warm environment and everybody was in climate shock."

Harry showcased her animal magnetism onstage at Max's Kansas City in New York on July 23, 1976 (left), and in a Stein shoot for *Creem* magazine that year. "The zebra dress was a funny moment," she told British *Vogue* in November 2014. "I love the [Stephen] Sprouse look a lot. He was the closest thing to a personal stylist then and made me outfits."

Blondie headed to England in 1977 (from left: Valentine, Stein, Harry, Destri and Burke). "We loved that the audience was a frenzied, crazed mass of feel-good energy," Harry wrote in *Face It* of their first show on May 20, 1977, at the Village Bowl in Bournemouth, England, where Harry recalled that the band had opened for Squeeze. "It made us rock that much harder."

"I love that outfit," Harry told *DuJour* in 2013 of her self-styled look in this March 1977 band portrait in front of the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. "It was very comfortable and cute looking."

"I loved fashion for as long as I can remember," Harry (circa late '70s) wrote in *Face It*.

Just as they were in this photo from February 1977, Harry told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in January 2020 that black tights or fitted pants are still an essential part of her wardrobe.

The 1979 incarnation of Blondie in New York City (clockwise): Harrison, Stein, Destri, Burke, Harry and Infante (sitting).

Blondie's team spirit was on display at the Sunset Marquis in West Hollywood, California, on April 24, 1978 with, from left, Infante, Burke, Harrison, Harry, Destri and Stein. As Harry told *Rolling Stone* a year later, "We always agree on the music. If somebody doesn't want to do a song, we just don't do it, that's all."

ONGAKU SENKA
KISS LIVE in TOKYO
TED NUGENT
SCHOOL BUS

Destri, Harry, Stein and Burke brought their New York style to Hollywood in 1979.

“Debbie put on that sexy persona with kind of a wink, saying, ‘This is what you want from me, I’ll kind of give it to you, but I’m also going to give you what I want to give you.’”

— *CATHAY CHE, AUTHOR OF* **DEBORAH HARRY: PLATINUM BLONDE**

Harry offered a playful outtake during Blondie's photo shoot at the Sunset Marquis in West Hollywood, California, on April 24, 1978.

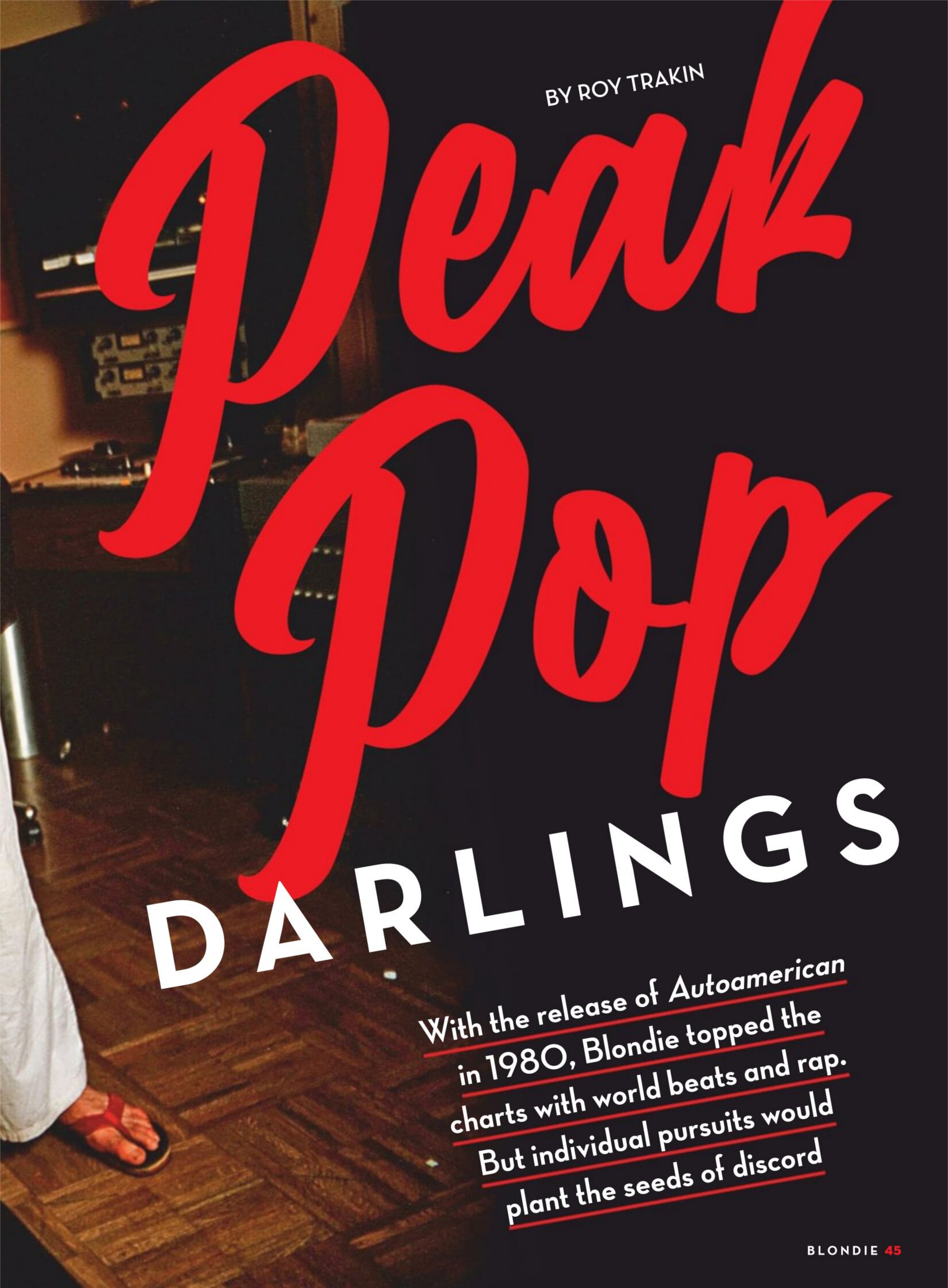
Harry (in Tokyo, January 1978) gushed about this Stephen Sprouse dress to *DuJour*. “It was a silk matte jersey of double thickness and had like a halter top with a little point that joined with the skirt,” she said. “It was the hottest, sexiest little dress — I loved it. It was a mini, and I used to wear it with the highest boots I could find.”

Don't let the rock-star stares fool you. "We were very lighthearted compared to the other bands at the time," Harry said on Blondie's official Instagram page in January 2023 of the group's late-'70s look. "We were just sort of a different animal."

Harry and Stein got down to business at the Mediasound studio in New York City on May 10, 1979. Photographer Allan Tannenbaum later wrote that his editor at the *SoHo Weekly News* had wanted Stein standing further behind Harry, but Tannenbaum felt "it was a successful cover anyway."

BY ROY TRAKIN

Peak Pop DARLINGS



With the release of *Autoamerican* in 1980, Blondie topped the charts with world beats and rap. But individual pursuits would plant the seeds of discord

AT THE DAWN OF THE '80S, BLONDIE was hotter than ever, even though promotional copy still clarified, for anyone who wasn't sure, that "Blondie is a group." In November 1980, coming off the unlikely success of their two disco-flavored hits, "Heart of Glass" and "Call Me," the band released *Autoamerican*, their fifth studio album, which scored them two genre-blending U.S. chart-topping singles: calypso-reggae-infused "The Tide is High" (a cover version of the 1967 song by the Paragons' John Holt), and the groundbreaking "Rapture."

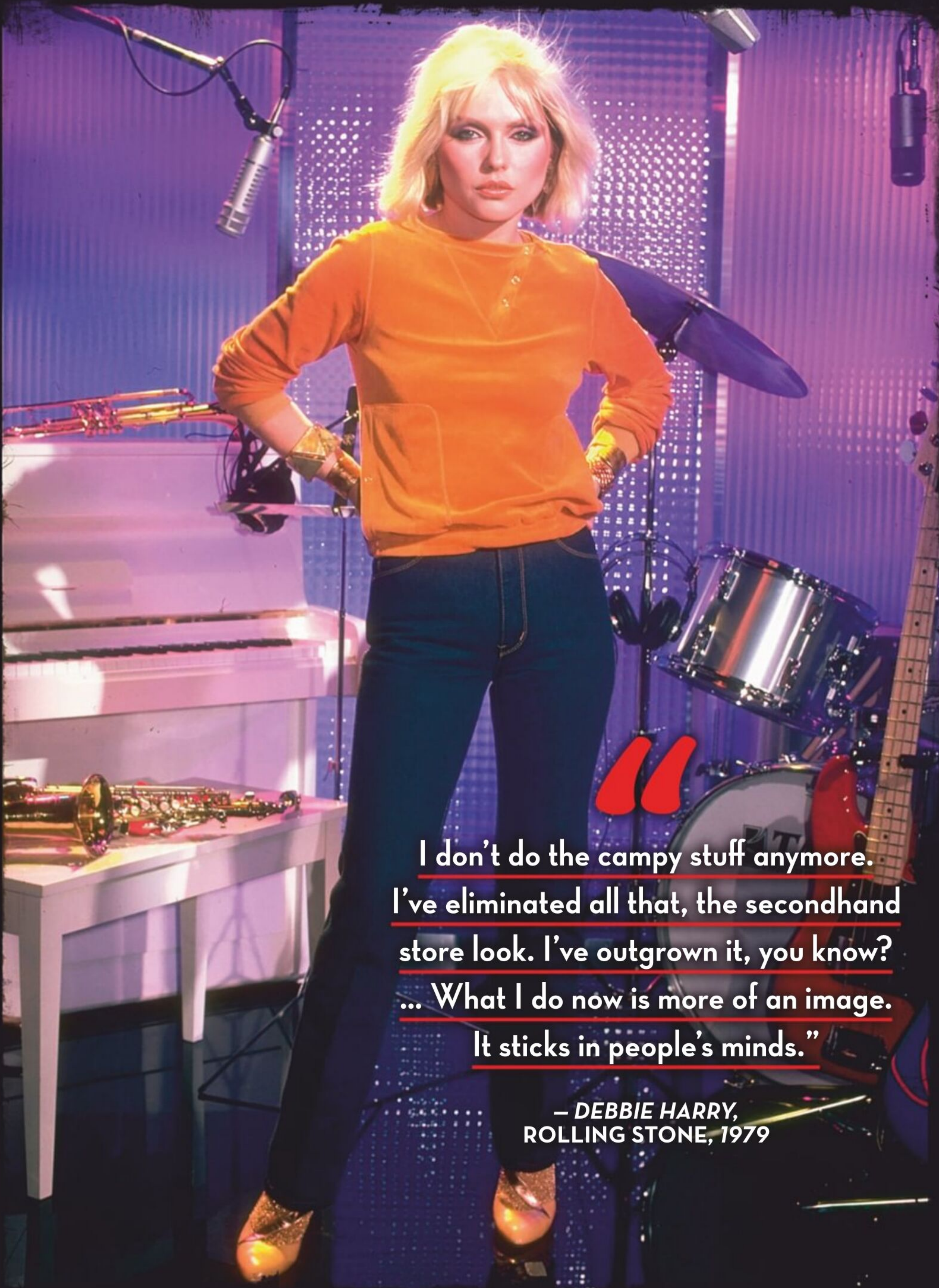
With a beat and a bass line that was an homage to Chic, one of their favorite bands, Stein and Harry drew upon their experience getting into the hip-hop scene through rap pioneer Fab 5 Freddy and attending youth raves at the Police Athletic League to create the foundation for "Rapture." A groovy meander where Harry's lilting, cooing verses about people in deep reverie "dancing very close" give way to her spitting out rhymes about a man from Mars who eats cars, bars and guitars, the song became the first U.S. No. 1 pop hit featuring rap verses.

"I think Chris wrote the rap initially and I added to it, [and] the man from Mars was Chris' buddy, actually," Harry explained on *The Story Behind the Song* podcast in November 2021. "He's a sci-fi aficionado. I think that's one of the things we both appreciated, like [our song] 'The Attack of the Giant Ants' on the first album, so I always felt like there was a kinship between these things."

As for the popularity of "Rapture," Harry added, "It's also a little bit silly but yet the music itself, the drive is strong behind it... it captures your attention because it's not predictable."

Top-name session musicians such as L.A. saxophone great Tom Scott, veteran orchestra conductor Jimmie Haskell, stand-up bassist Ray Brown and funk guitarist Wah Wah Watson all made cameos on *Autoamerican*, which represented a cross-section of musical forms with the avant-garde, cinematic instrumental "Europa" that opens the ▶

Things were looking up for Blondie in 1980 (here in Century City, California) with the release of *Autoamerican*. Now sought out for her unique style, Harry even did ads for Gloria Vanderbilt jeans by Murjani (opposite page).



> “I don’t do the campy stuff anymore. I’ve eliminated all that, the secondhand store look. I’ve outgrown it, you know? … What I do now is more of an image. It sticks in people’s minds.”

— *DEBBIE HARRY,*
ROLLING STONE, *1979*

Eating to the beat: Stein and Harry got salty in their New York City kitchen in March 1981. "It was a piece about Blondie at home, and I was going for a sort of tongue-in-cheek take on domesticity," photographer Allan Tannenbaum, then photo editor of the *SoHo Weekly News*, recalled to *The Guardian* in 2017 of his whimsical shot.

album, the '30s Depression-era swing of "Here's Looking at You," the cabaret jazz of "Faces," the pseudo-honky-tonk of "Go Through It" and the yearning lullaby of "Follow Me," a cover from Broadway's *Camelot*.

Commenting on the eclectic nature of the album for my *Hit Parader* feature in June 1981, Stein told me, "I'm disturbed by the narrowness of rock 'n' roll fans and what they want to listen to. It's sad that a lot of these older types of music will get lost." He then continued, "The world of rock is always being sold as a socially relevant commodity, when it's just showbiz like anything else. I think the tragedy is when all these tastes get broken down with everybody relating to their own little camp. The most successful acts are the ones that constantly create their own frame of reference, avoiding the mold."

Harry, emerging from the apartment kitchen where she was making pumpkin pie, added, "When I started working on *Autoamerican*, my whole idea was to be earthbound and realistic. We tried for that versatility on earlier records, but I don't think we pulled it off until now. My voice hasn't changed, but I know I've improved as a singer and recording artist. I also believe my attitude and my ability to express moods has really gotten better." Indeed, the group's chilly cynicism had turned into a warm generosity, charting the difference between 1978's "Heart of Glass" with "Once I had a love and it was a gas / Soon turned out to be a pain in the ass" and 1980's "Live It Up" with "You know it's so passé / To sleep without you every day."

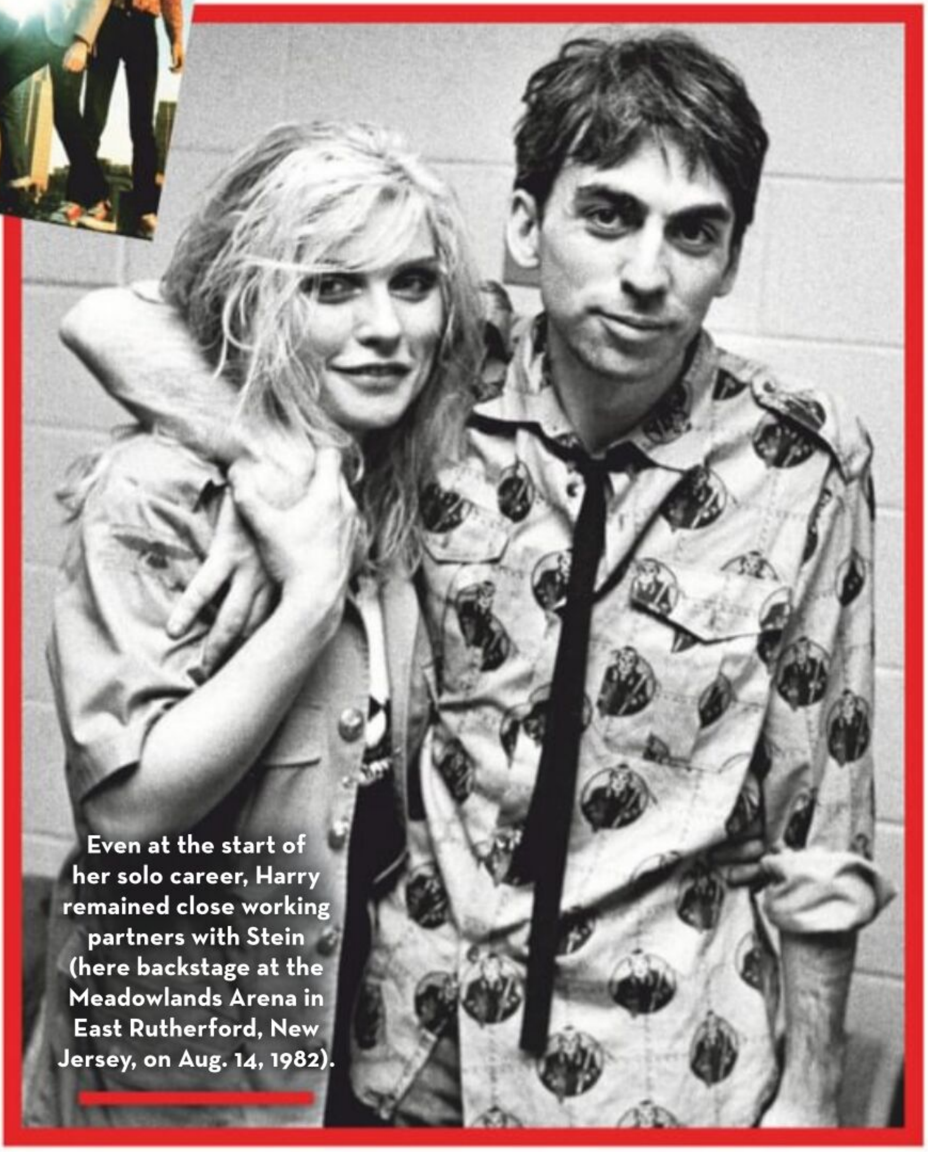
Talking about their romantic attachment, Stein noted, "Both sides have their say. Our roles are hard to nail down because we flip-flop and take opposite sides as well. We have a very fluid relationship that can adapt to just about anything." Harry nodded and said,

Chic's Nile Rodgers and Harry met in the Downtown music scene and became longtime friends (here at the N.Y.C. album release party for *KooKoo* in 1981).

"I don't think there's any way to describe my existence except it's mine. There's no such thing as a domestic existence. Everybody lives their life the way they want. I do things for myself."

She wasn't the only one. By 1981, members of Blondie began to work on outside projects, with Harry and Stein writing music and lyrics for John Waters' film *Polyester*, and Harry and Jimmy Destri recording solo albums. In just the month of February, Harry had appeared as both host and musical guest on *Saturday Night Live* and sang "Rainbow Connection" with Kermit the Frog on *The Muppet Show*. That October, Chrysalis Records released *The Best of Blondie*, a greatest hits album that went to No. 30 in the U.S.

With Blondie taking a break, Harry and Stein hooked up with Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, founding members of their beloved R&B-funk band Chic, for *KooKoo*, Harry's debut solo album. ▶



Even at the start of her solo career, Harry remained close working partners with Stein (here backstage at the Meadowlands Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey, on Aug. 14, 1982).

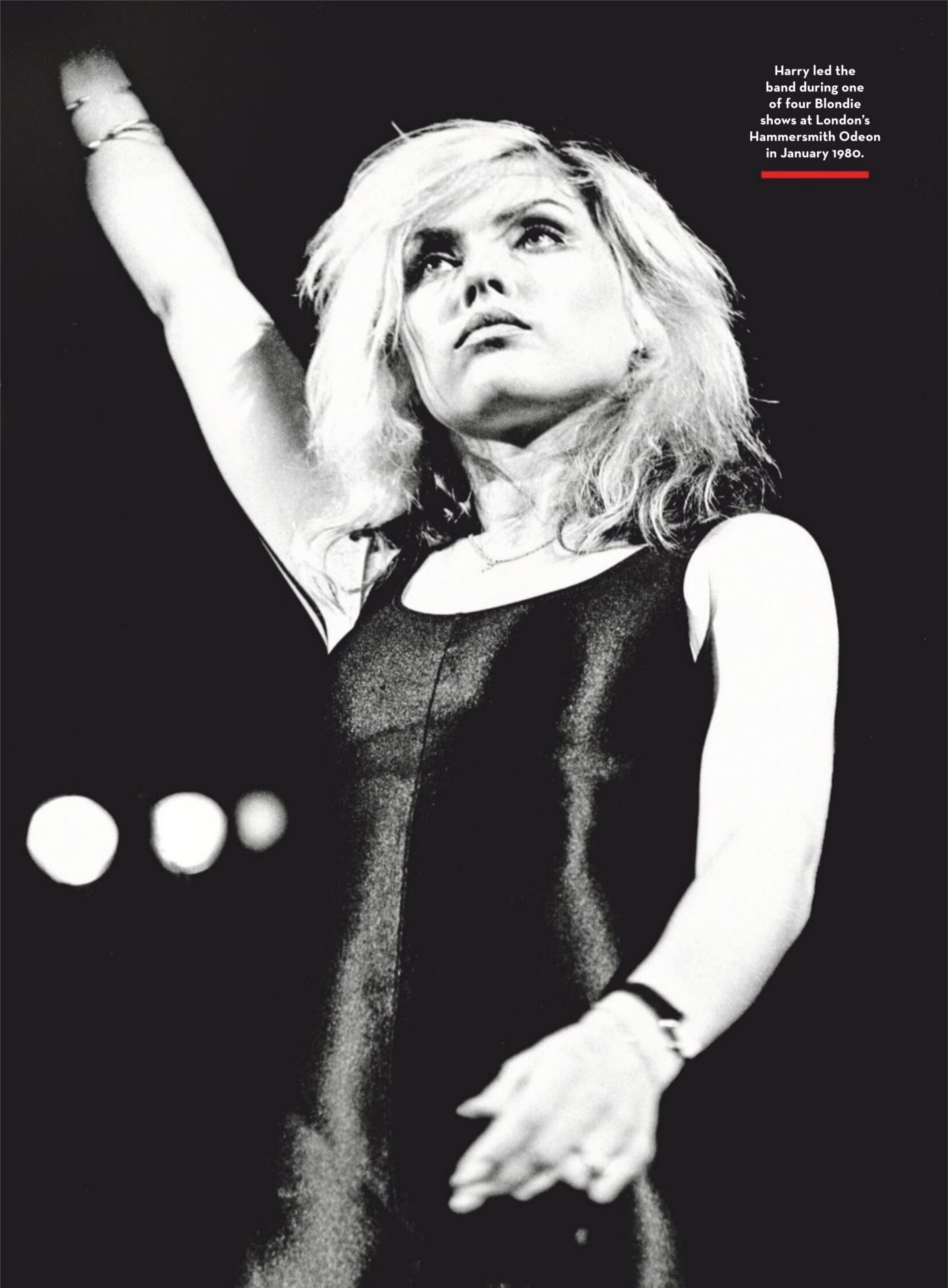
Adding some diversity to her already impressive resume, Harry recorded the *Polyester* (1981) soundtrack with director John Waters and headphone-wearing actor Bill Murray (left, circa 1980) and hosted *Saturday Night Live* in February 1981, singing two numbers, including a cover of Devo's "Come Back Jonee" (above).

"We'd met them briefly at the Power Station when Blondie was recording *Eat to the Beat* and they were working with Diana Ross," Harry wrote in her 2019 memoir, *Face It*. "Later we got to know them socially."

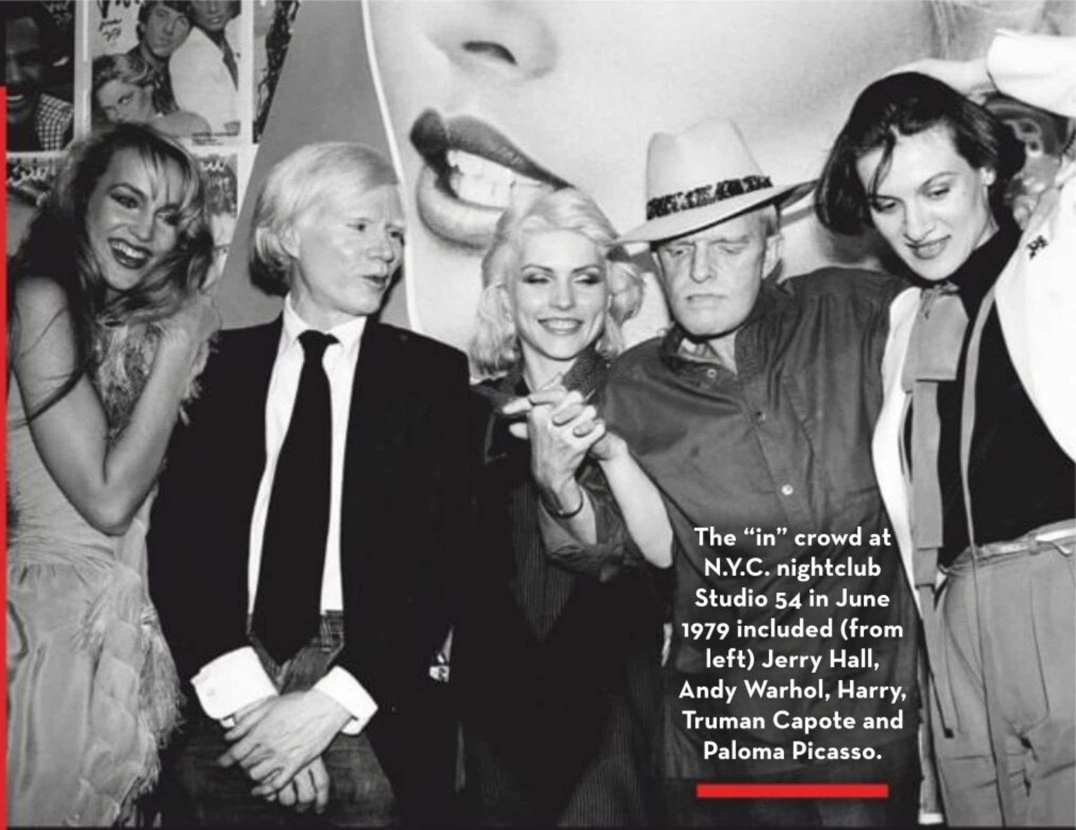
KooKoo represented a new direction for Harry and Stein, this time fusing the funk and dance elements Rodgers and Edwards were famous for with their own rock sensibilities. To signify that this was indeed a solo effort, Harry tapped Swiss artist H.R. Giger, best known for his work on the fearsome otherworldly being in *Alien* (1979), to design the cover. He took photographer Brian Aris' stark portrait of Harry and added four spikes through her head, which he said represented earth, air, fire and water and was influenced by his own experience with acupuncture. As for the album title, he said in 1991, "I had thought of something like *Aku-Aku*, calling to mind [adventurer and author Thor] Heyerdahl. From that, Debbie made *KooKoo*."

Although Giger also directed videos for two singles, "Backfired" and "Now I Know You Know," the album itself was only a moderate success. When Blondie reconvened in December 1981 to record a new album, it was clear their time on hiatus didn't reinvigorate the group. The first Blondie era was ending with the band on the brink of a breakup.

On this fifth-season episode of *The Muppet Show* in February 1981, Harry helped Kermit's nephew, Robin, and his fellow Frog Scouts, earn punk merit badges.

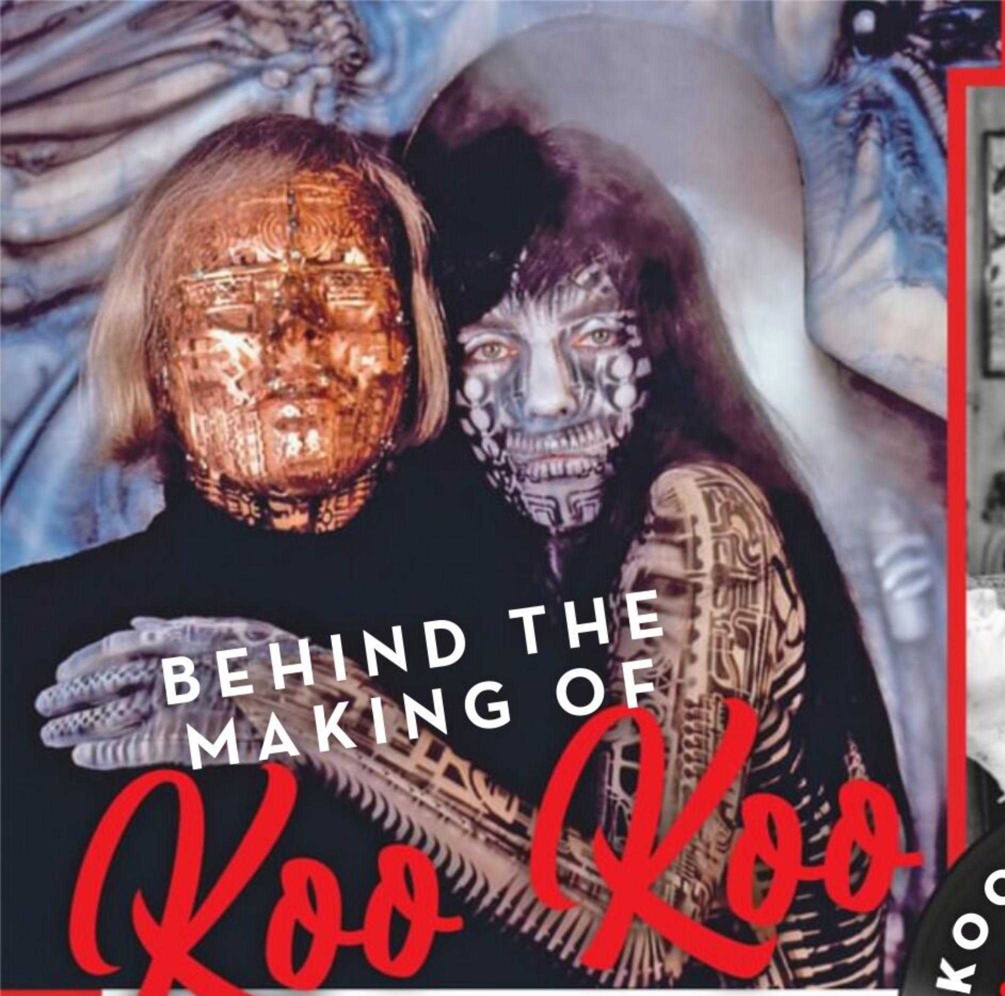


Harry led the band during one of four Blondie shows at London's Hammersmith Odeon in January 1980.

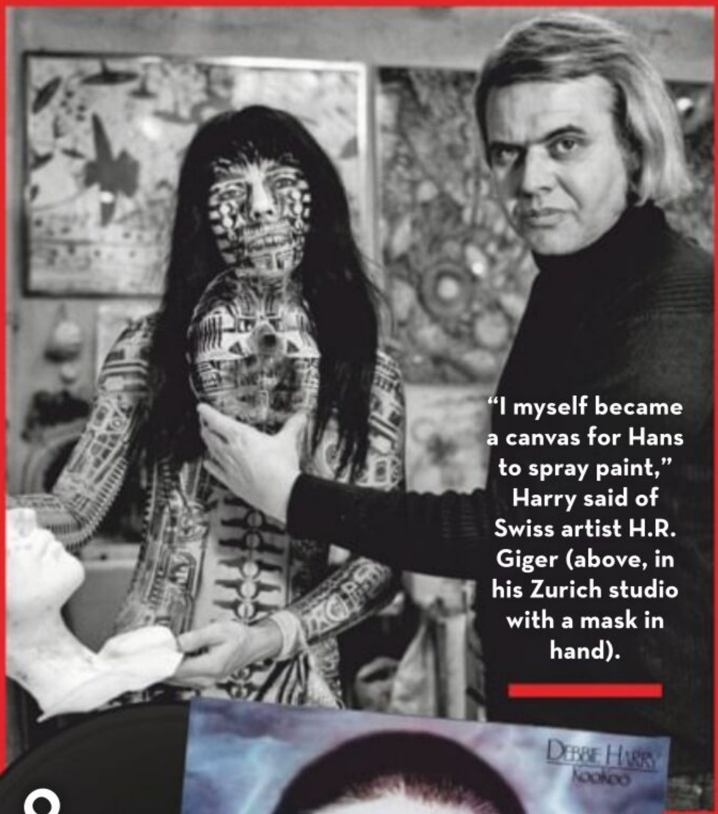


The "in" crowd at N.Y.C. nightclub Studio 54 in June 1979 included (from left) Jerry Hall, Andy Warhol, Harry, Truman Capote and Paloma Picasso.

Artist Warhol collaborated frequently with Harry for her work (top three insets) and his own (bottom inset). "I admired Andy so much," Harry (right, in January 1980) wrote in *Face It*. "Like Andy, I felt the influence of Marcel Duchamp and a kinship to Dada and Popism, which became foundational to what I was creating."



BEHIND THE MAKING OF Koo Koo



"I myself became a canvas for Hans to spray paint," Harry said of Swiss artist H.R. Giger (above, in his Zurich studio with a mask in hand).

The following is an excerpt from a December 1981 Hit Parader *interview Roy Trakin conducted with Harry and Stein on the release of Harry's first solo album:*

Was the acupuncture cover a way to deglamorize Debbie's image?

STEIN: We did want to cut down a little on the exploitation end of it. Maybe it means Debbie's just sick of her face. I've never liked the merchandising of Blondie and all that crap. We're just trying to cut it down a bit.

What was behind the collaboration with Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards?

HARRY: We were both heading to similar places. They were heading towards rock, in their own way, and we were headed towards disco and R&B, and we met somewhere in the middle.

Your voice comes across much more unadorned and natural on the new album.

HARRY: With Blondie, my voice was usually phased, compressed and EQ'ed [equalized] a lot. This is very simple and straightforward. This is what I really sound like, what people hear in concert. It's all a matter of concentration, like anything else you get better at. You get more direct, you overcome inhibitions, you override your ego and become more selfless. It's all in the breathing. You have to use your head and your chest. When I'm recording, I think about putting overt expression in the sound because the listener is not there to see the emotion.

Do you feel trapped by your image as it's portrayed in the media?

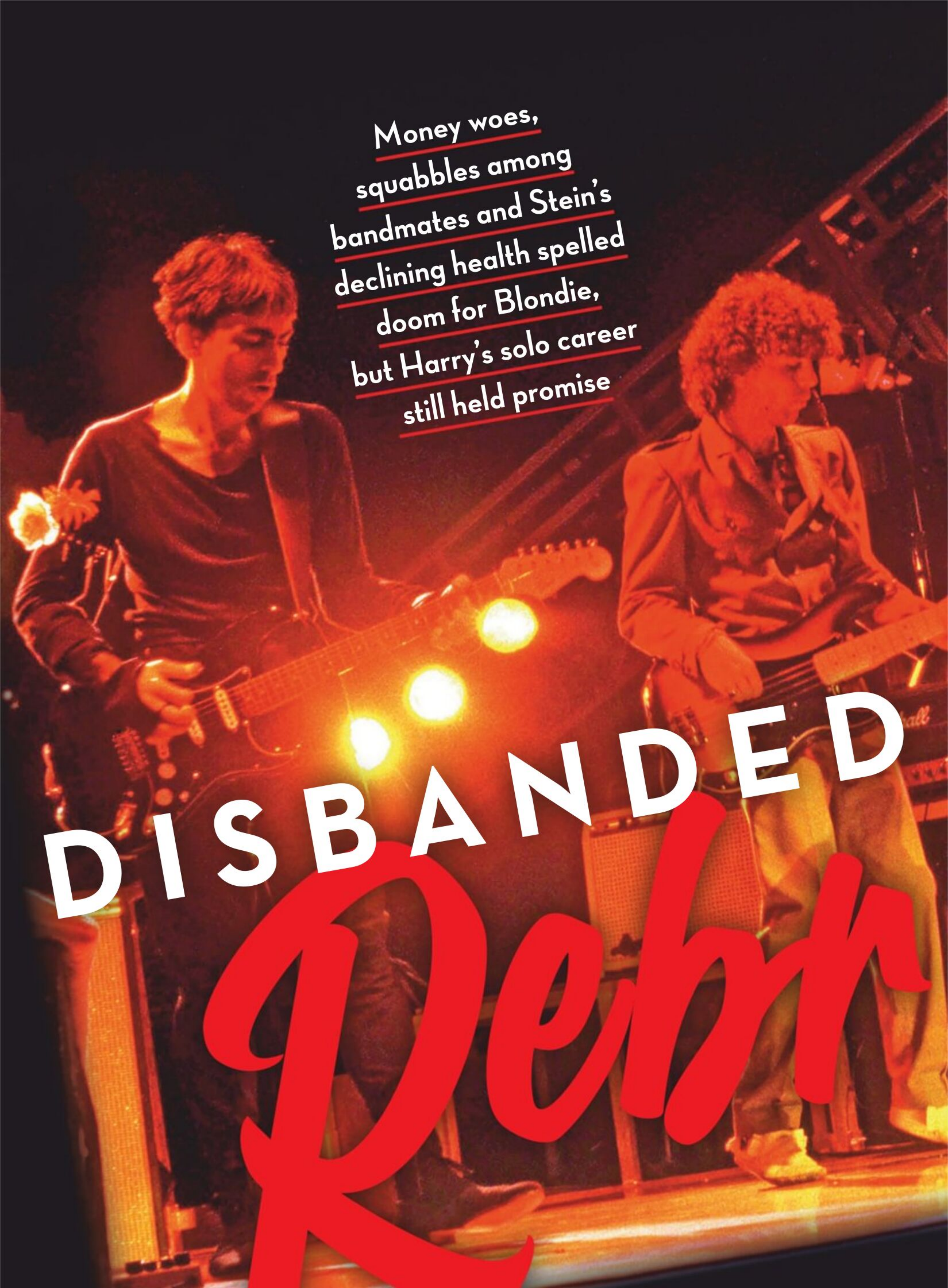
HARRY: What I dislike is when people analyze me the way they see me, not objectively. Blondie is certainly a part of me, it's a part of everybody that's in it and it's like a cartoon, kitsch kind of pop thing. I'm not trying to shed it.

The album's message is one of faith and optimism.

HARRY: I refuse to do anything from a down-head point of view. Nothing that's depressing. I don't like to write like that even though sometimes I might feel like that. I don't want to foist that on other people. I won't personally take people into the depths of hopelessness. After all, I'm an actress, a performer. Part of my job is to entertain people. That's what it's all about, to let people have an area where they can express themselves. Even if it is through another person. That's why everyone interprets lyrics differently.

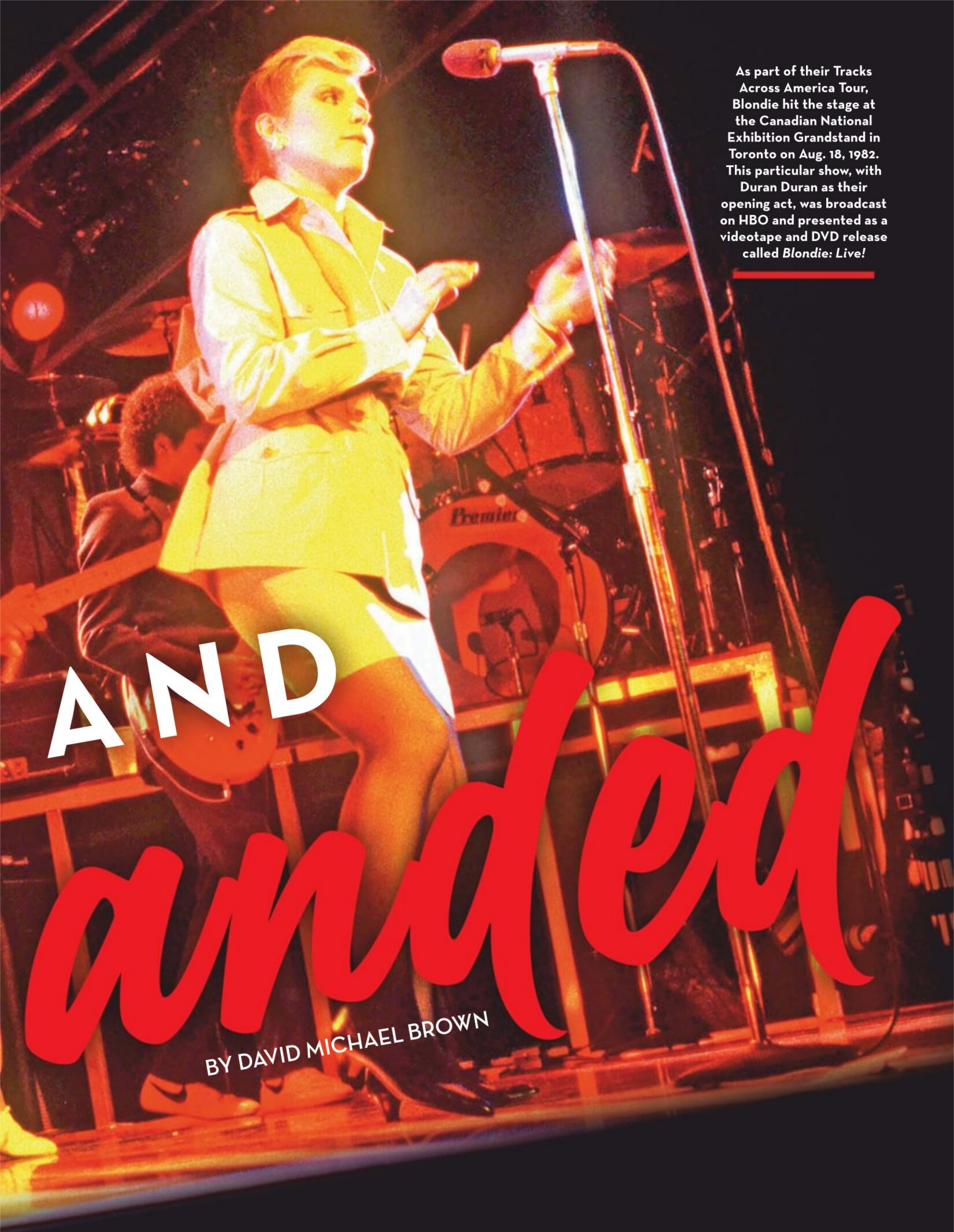
STEIN: I think everybody has the potential to be Debbie or like her; they just aren't aware of it. She has a universal identification.

While they looked like a solid six-piece on the roof of New York recording studio The Record Plant in 1978, Blondie's lineup would undergo some changes in the 1980s. "If everything had been lovey-dovey," bassist Infante (second from right) said, "the music might have been different."



Money woes, squabbles among bandmates and Stein's declining health spelled doom for Blondie, but Harry's solo career still held promise

DISBANDED Debr



AND anded

BY DAVID MICHAEL BROWN

As part of their Tracks Across America Tour, Blondie hit the stage at the Canadian National Exhibition Grandstand in Toronto on Aug. 18, 1982. This particular show, with Duran Duran as their opening act, was broadcast on HBO and presented as a videotape and DVD release called *Blondie: Live!*

Harry and Stein (on the roof of their New York City apartment on Nov. 28, 1980) enjoyed their Downtown home. "It was very run down, but a great space," Stein told British *Vogue* in 2014. "We were just around the corner from CBGBs — [William] Burroughs lived down the block in the Bunker, some of the Talking Heads lived very near. There were a lot of individualistic types about."

IN NOVEMBER 1982, BLONDIE called it quits. The critical and public response to their latest album, *The Hunter*, had been muted, reflecting its troubled production. Rumors of infighting between the group and founders Debbie Harry and Chris Stein weren't helping, either. Guitarist Frank Infante only played on the record after he initiated legal proceedings, claiming they fired him without cause. (He was eventually reinstated after an out-of-court settlement.) As Infante told Salon in 1999, "The only thing Debbie ever said to me that might have told me where their heads were at was one time when she said, 'We wanna be a nice rock pop group, Frank — you oughta be in the Stones!'"

Despite the album's rocky recording sessions, Stein was positive about the end result. "I think *The Hunter* is our best record to date," the guitarist said in 1982. "I know we've got some real hit records on this record." But those hits didn't come. After the huge success of "The Tide is High" and "Rapture" from *Autoamerican*, "Island of Lost Souls" only reached No. 37 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, while "War Child" was only released as a 12-inch dance record in the U.S.

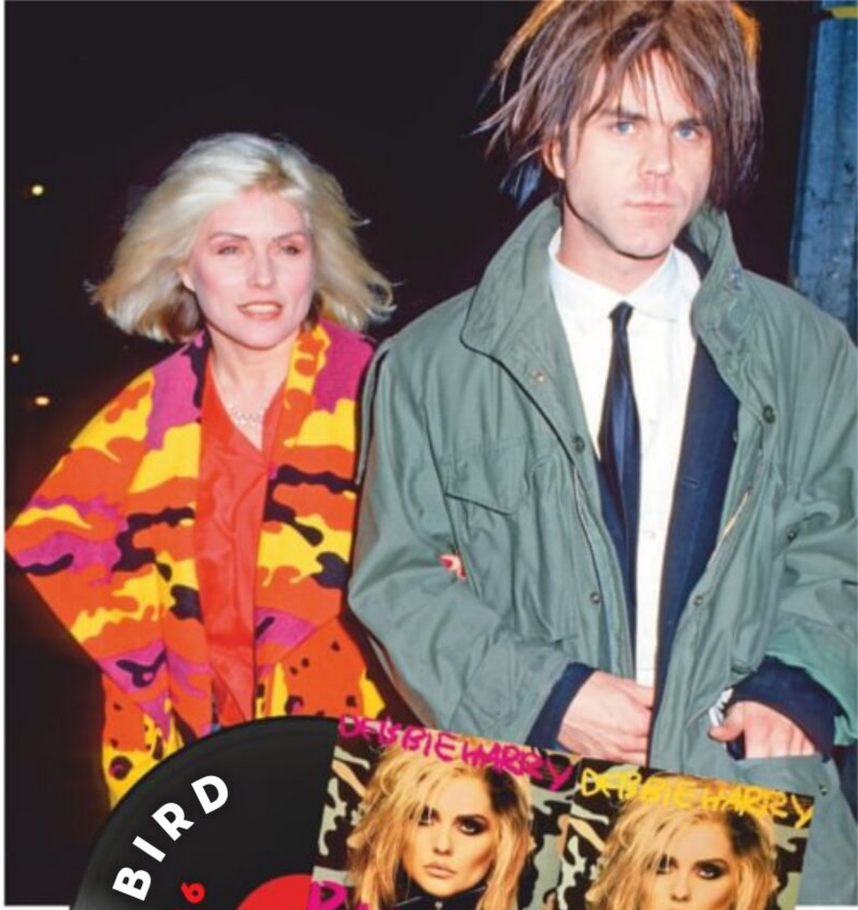
Still, the band pushed on, heading out on the road in July 1982 with guitarist Infante unsurprisingly replaced by session musician Eddie Martinez. Although Blondie augmented their lineup with keyboardist Abel Domingues and a three-man horn section, tours in the U.K. and the rest of Europe were canceled due to poor ticket sales and, worse yet, Stein's declining health from a then-undetermined illness. "Chris was wasting away. More than once, he collapsed," Harry wrote in her 2019 memoir, *Face It*. "We managed to get through the last night of the Duran Duran tour, at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia in August 1982. There was no way we could go to Europe. And that was it. It was over. Not just the tour, but Blondie. The band officially broke up a few months later."

Even as Stein struggled, he continued to guide Harry as she now launched

I didn't go around announcing it, but I think people knew it was the end," Harry (here at The Ritz London in November 1983) told the *Los Angeles Times* about the state of Blondie after recording 1982's *The Hunter*.

"Chris always says that every kid wants to be a rock star, it's like a natural inheritance being an American. So obviously, we were bitten by the bug."

— *DEBBIE HARRY*



While Harry and Stein (above left, in New York in 1981) collaborated on her musical and artistic career, she found style inspiration with designer Stephen Sprouse (above right in October 1987). "When I started being dressed by Steve, things shot up and that's when it really became fashion," Harry told *DuJour* in 2013. Sprouse also designed the album cover for Harry's second solo studio album, *Rockbird* (above inset).

a solo career in earnest. This time, she embraced electronic pop with the Giorgio Moroder-produced single "Rush Rush," which was featured on the soundtrack to Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1983). But when Stein was finally diagnosed with pemphigus vulgaris, a rare autoimmune skin disorder, Harry put her musical life on hold to care for him.

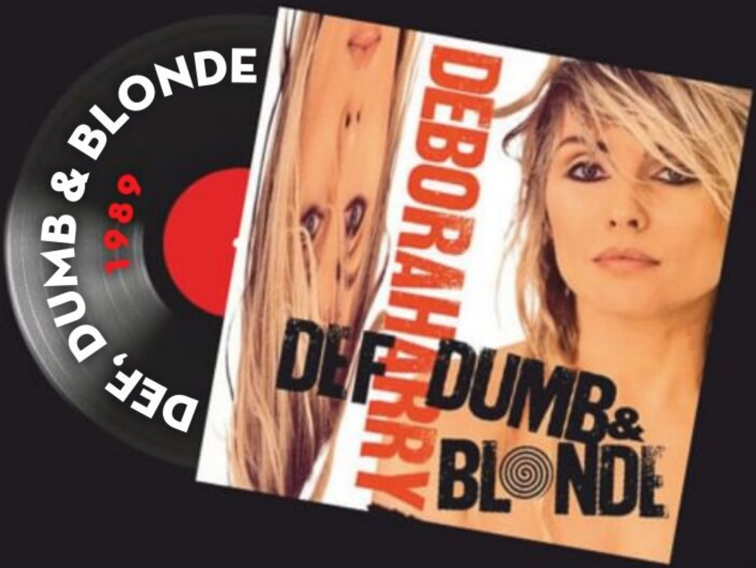
"When I got ill, I never thought it would be fatal," Stein told U.K. magazine *Big Issue* in 2020. "I just thought it was mysterious and annoying. And I had to be in hospital for three months. That was annoying, but I did a lot of drugs throughout. I don't know if they helped, but I had a f--king spinal tap and that really hurt, so I got stoned after that. But doing drugs really compromised my immune system, which might have exacerbated the whole thing. So it probably wasn't a great idea."

For her part, Harry wrote in *Face It* of spending nights on a cot by Stein's hospital bed and tending to his severely blistered skin when he got home: "(T) he press were trying to portray me as the second coming of Mother Teresa, but that's ridiculous. Chris and I were a team. We were partners. Of course I would look after him and he would have done the same for me. People would say how difficult it was for me, and it was difficult, but it was life-threatening for Chris."

As Stein recovered, Harry released the upbeat bop "Feel the Spin," a track from the Sheila E. and Run-D.M.C. movie *Krush Groove* (1985). Then came *Rockbird*, her sophomore solo album, in 1986, produced by J. Geils Band keyboard player Seth Justman. It fared better overseas, with the single "French Kissin' in the USA," written by future *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory* co-creator Chuck Lorre, reaching the top 10 in the U.K. But Harry went to No. 1 on the U.S dance chart with the third single, "In Love with Love," which she co-wrote with Stein.

Reflecting her embrace of Top 40 radio, Harry signed with U.S. label Geffen Records and moved away from the stark H.R. Giger aesthetic of *KooKoo*. She tapped her friend, fashion designer and punk artist Stephen Sprouse, to design *Rockbird*'s cover, which included a background painting by Andy Warhol. "I was overjoyed when Geffen agreed to release *Rockbird* with the title in four ▶

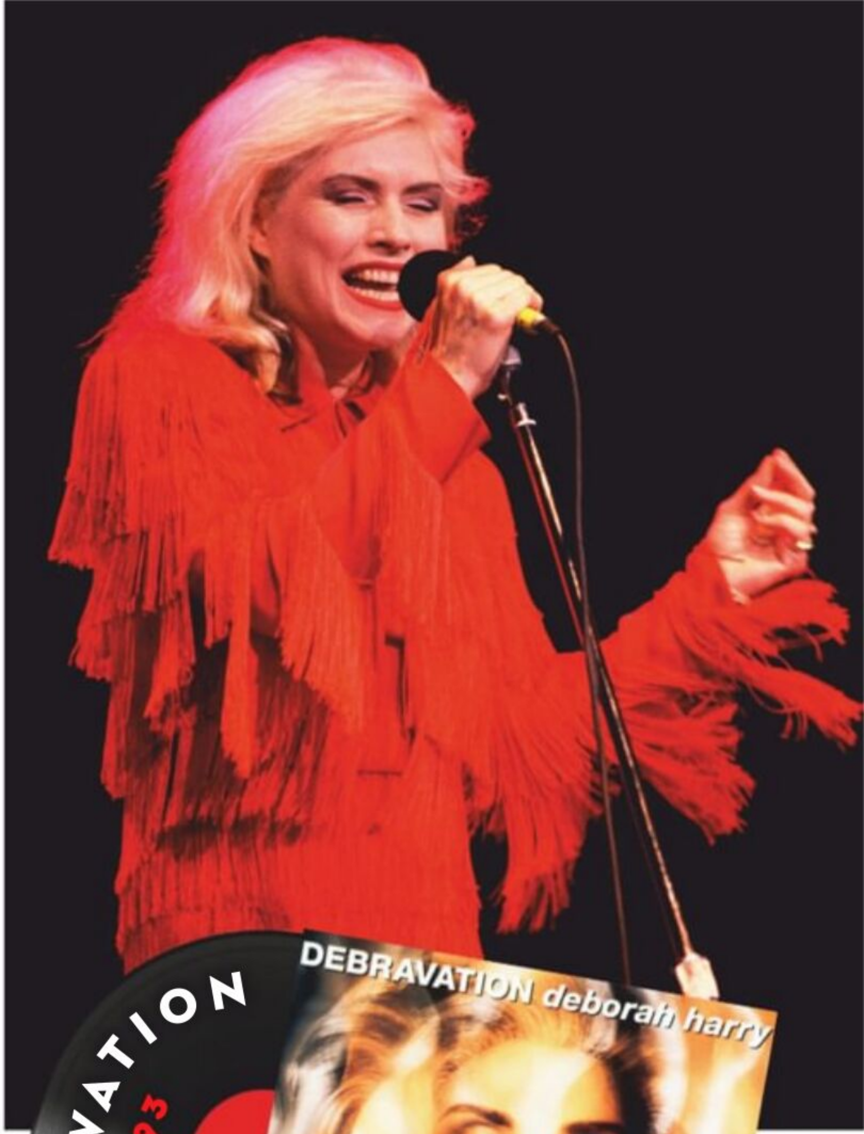
In keeping with Warhol's background painting on her *Rockbird* cover, Harry sported camouflage print at the BPIs (British Phonographic Industry Awards) on Feb. 9, 1987, in London.



Harry was spotted performing at the Paradiso in Amsterdam on Nov. 21, 1989, in support of her third solo studio album, *Def, Dumb & Blonde.*

STIRRED, BUT NOT SHAKEN

The Hunter featured "For Your Eyes Only," which Harry and Stein had originally been asked to write for the 1981 James Bond film of the same name. Not enamored with the band's original track, the film's producers pitched Blondie a composition by lyricist Michael Leeson and composer Bill Conti. When the band balked at the idea of recording someone else's song, it was Scottish singer Sheena Easton who recorded her rendition of "For Your Eyes Only," earning Oscar and Grammy nominations, along with the 1982 Grammy for Best New Artist, for her efforts.



different colors of Day-Glo ink, so you could buy the colors you liked best," she wrote in *Face It*, but added of the difficulty in gaining traction for the album in the U.S., "reinventing myself beyond 'Blondie' was a challenge. But you must know by now that I do love a challenge."

A few months before Harry released *Rockbird* in November 1986, Blondie drummer Clem Burke joined Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart as part of the Eurythmics for the recording and tour of their 1986 album, *Revenge*. Keyboard player Jimmy Destri began working behind the scenes, remixing artists such as Prince and INXS. But while theirs was a session musician's path, Harry continued to put herself out there as a solo artist.

Now billed "Deborah" instead of "Debbie," Harry embarked on her first-ever solo tour to promote *Def, Dumb & Blonde* (1989), which featured lead single "I Want That Man," written by Tom Bailey and Alannah Currie of the Thompson Twins, which reached No. 2 on the Billboard Alternative Airplay chart and No. 2 in Australia. But then Harry's next album, *Debravation* (1993), was poorly reviewed.

While Harry looked to win admirers for her own material, new fans were discovering the joys of Blondie, largely fueled by a non-stop succession of compilations and best-of albums. Despite ending their romance in 1987, Harry partnered with Stein and reunited with Burke for the 1990 Escape from New York tour with the Ramones and Talking Heads members Jerry Harrison and husband-and-wife team Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, who were playing with their side project, Tom Tom Club.

It wasn't until 1997, however, that Harry, Stein, Burke, Destri and Gary Valentine decided to record again after getting back together the previous year. But before a note could be played, they were sued by former members Nigel Harrison and Infante for using the Blondie name without them as part of the group. Despite the tumult, Blondie was now exalted by a fresh generation of fledgling female-led bands, with Garbage's Shirley Manson and No Doubt's Gwen Stefani hailing Harry as an inspirational proto-feminist punk rocker. Anticipation, like the tide, was high for the band to record again.

Stein posted this photo of Harry in a black hat (above left, circa 1987) on Instagram in October 2022. As part of the Escape From New York Tour with the Ramones and Tom Tom Club, she performed at Milwaukee Summerfest (above right) on July 1, 1990.

DEBBIE HARRY *on-screen*

"Well, there were wigs," Harry explained when entertainment news site *Vulture* asked about her character's gravity-defying beehive in *Hairspray*. "I think the big blow-up wig was a little bit more because there were about five or six wigs pinned to a chicken-wire frame. All I can equate it with is those big headpieces the showgirls used to wear in Vegas."

Harry and Sonny Bono played the conservative parents of Amber von Tussle (Vitamin C, far left) in John Waters' 1988 comedy. The Von Tussles tussled with Tracy Turnblad (Ricki Lake, far right) and her mom, Edna (Divine).

Harry, as restless wife Lillian (right), got entangled with her apartment block super, Larry (Everett McGill, left), in *Union City* (1980), the film that helped inspire the Blondie song "Union City Blue."

USUALLY CREDITED AS Deborah Harry, the Blondie lead singer ramped up her acting career in the '80s. Her first notable starring role was in neo-noir *Union City* (1980). Set in the '50s, this gritty kitchen-sink drama stars Dennis Lipscomb as Harlan, a repressed, uptight accountant with an unhealthy obsession with whoever is stealing milk bottles from his doorstep every morning. Harry smolders as Lillian, Harlan's young, frustrated and neglected spouse, while Everett McGill (*Twin Peaks*) plays her all-too-loving building's super, Larry, and Pat Benatar makes her on-screen movie debut as a newlywed named Jeanette. While Stein worked on the film's music, Harry was contractually forbidden to sing on the soundtrack. Even so, the film inspired the Blondie single, "Union City Blue."

Her work for visionary Canadian director David Cronenberg saw Harry really make her mark as an actor. Hailed by Andy Warhol as *A Clockwork Orange* for the '80s, the hallucinatory horrors of *Videodrome* (1983) included undulating television sets, pulsating Betamax cassettes, flesh guns and a seductive Harry as Nicki Brand, a sadomasochistic radio host whose image is used to lure Max Renn (James Woods), the seedy president of cable channel CIVIC-TV, into a world of politicized snuff television. In 2016, film critic Howard Hampton wrote of her performance in the cult classic that "a vivid, smallish part can either anchor or undo a risky, conceptually spiky film like David Cronenberg's viscerally deranged phantasia: Harry's presence grounds it in acute, self-aware reality."

Despite tackling racism and body shaming, John Waters' *Hairspray* (1988) was a far lighter affair. In a role later played by Michelle Pfeiffer in the big-budget musical remake, Harry teased her hair high in the frothy 1960s-set comedy with a big message and a huge heart. Harry has a ball hamming it up with Sonny Bono as the parents of Amber von Tussle (Colleen Fitzpatrick, aka Vitamin C), the main rival to Tracy Turnblad (Ricki Lake) in becoming Miss Auto Show 1963 on *The Corny Collins Show*.

Harry's acting career has continued with periodic appearances in horror anthology *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990), John Carpenter's TV movie *Body Bags* (1993) and James Mangold's *Cop Land* (1997) opposite Sylvester Stallone. And then there was the part that got away. "My biggest regret is turning down the role of the blonde robot, Pris, in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner,*" Harry revealed in a 2014 interview about the character ultimately played by Daryl Hannah in 1982. "My record company didn't want me to take time out to do a movie. I shouldn't have listened to them."

In *Videodrome* (1983), Harry starred as Nicki Brand (left, and right with James Woods' Max Renn). "I could really become immersed and actually be slightly frightened," Harry told *The Telegraph* of her experience filming the David Cronenberg sci-fi horror classic.

In order for a band reunion to work, Blondie members Destri, Harry, Stein and Burke (here in London in 1998) agreed they had to record new material.

Bac ON

By the start of the new century, the band had returned to the charts and would be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame

THE ROAD

BY ANDY ABRAHAMS

At the American Music Awards in L.A. on Jan. 11, 1999, Blondie performed "No Exit" with Coolio, Mo B. Dick and members of the Wu-Tang Clan.

WHEN CHRIS STEIN RAISED THE IDEA of a Blondie reunion with Debbie Harry, she said she wasn't interested at all. "I honestly thought that he had lost his mind," Harry recalled in *Face It*. "We had this phenomenal, massive, worldwide success with Blondie, hit after hit and tour after tour, and then went through such a terrible experience with the illness, the drugs, the financial ruin. And neither of us was dead." She also disliked the thought of becoming a traveling oldies act. "I didn't want to go backwards and relive the past," Harry told Australian *Today* in a 1999 TV interview.

The seed of a comeback was planted, however, when Stein, deeply in debt, responded to an ad in New York's *Village Voice* newspaper, ready to sell some of his gold and platinum records to a rock memorabilia collector. It turned out the collector was married to a member of a famous New York real estate family whose sister-in-law was the inspiration ▶

The Blondie lineup for the April 2004 VH1 Divas benefit concert in Las Vegas included (from left) keyboardist Kevin Patrick, guitarist Paul Carbonara, Harry, Stein and Burke.

While the Phasm 8 Tour mixed the band's hits with tracks from *The Curse of Blondie* (2003), Harry and the group also threw in their cover of the Allman Brothers Band's "Midnight Rider" during the encore of this June 2004 London show.

At the VH1 Divas concert, Blondie performed a short set of their hits. Harry was joined by Eve for "Rapture," for which she wore a camouflage dress (opposite page, inset), and Joss Stone for "One Way or Another," for which she donned bright lime green (above).

behind "Denise," the 1963 Randy & the Rainbows hit that Blondie reinvented as "Denis" in 1978. "The synchronicity of it was eerie," wrote Harry in *Face It*. Through that connection, Stein and Harry would meet manager Allen Kovac, who helped the pair start gathering the band together.

Most of the original lineup — Harry, Stein, drummer Clem Burke and keyboardist Jimmy Destri — went to work recording tracks for the group's new album, joined by guitarist Paul Carbonara and bassist Leigh Foxx. (Former band members Frank Infante and Nigel Harrison's $1 million lawsuit over potential future income from a reunion was unsuccessful.) The revived band turned back to their roots when they enlisted producer Craig Leon, who had manned the mixing board as the lead engineer on their first album.

In February 1999, Blondie released their seventh studio album, *No Exit* — their first new work in 17 years. The title was a not-so-tongue-in-cheek reference to the Jean-Paul Sartre play of the same name. "There is... the sign you see everywhere that says 'No Exit,'" Burke, who came up with the album title, is quoted as saying in Harry's memoir. "Because whatever you do, you are always going to be 'so-and-so from Blondie.' And Debbie is always going to be 'Blondie.'"

An infectious mix of vintage Blondie guitar hooks with pop, reggae and rap, the title track featured the late hip-hop star Coolio. "I wanted to get a song on *The Sopranos* and I figured they'd like it if I did a pro-Jersey rap," Harry said in the press release for the album, which went on to become a critical success. It spawned a hit single, "Maria," a rocker written by Destri about his Catholic school days and finding the right girl. The song topped the U.K. singles chart in early 1999 and became the band's first top-charting single there since 1980's "The Tide Is High." For Harry, success the second time around was doubly gratifying. "It's actually more fun," she told Australian *Today*. "I'm having a better time doing the shows. I think that we all have reached a degree of

Blondie recorded a set for A&E series *Live by Request* at the theater in New York's John Jay College on May 7, 2004, with (from left) Carbonara, Leigh Foxx, Burke, Harry, Stein and Patrick.

proficiency with our instruments. It's been heartwarming and satisfying."

Feeling rejuvenated, the band went back into the studio to record *The Curse of Blondie*, released in 2003. The album title, according to Harry, was a nod to old black-and-white B-movies, but it proved to be an unfortunate choice, as the release didn't reach the commercial heights of *No Exit*. It did produce a No. 12 single in the U.K., "Good Boys," which also made it to No. 7 on the Billboard Dance Club chart.

Even so, Blondie's place in rock's pantheon was secured when they were announced as part of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's Class of 2006. "I had never taken the Hall of Fame that seriously, but to be honest, it felt great to get that validation," Harry wrote in *Face It*. But band drama boiled over at the induction ceremony itself at New York City's famed Waldorf Astoria hotel.

Shirley Manson of Garbage (second from right) inducted Blondie into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame on March 13, 2006, including former band members (from left) Infante, Harrison and Valentine.

Harry (flanked by Burke, left, and Stein) posed in the press room at the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Harry later wrote in *Face It* about band squabbles that night, "There's always politics."

Despite their legal fight, Harrison and Infante were still invited to the event, where each band member went onstage to accept the honor after being inducted into the Hall by Garbage lead singer Shirley Manson. Infante went up to the microphone after Burke, Stein, Destri and Harry had offered their thank-yous and said, "This is one of the greatest gigs you can do as a musician... One thing that would make it better is if we could actually perform for you here tonight. But for some reason, some of us are not allowed to do that. I'd like to play but, Debbie is that allowed? No? Not tonight? Oh, pretty please?"

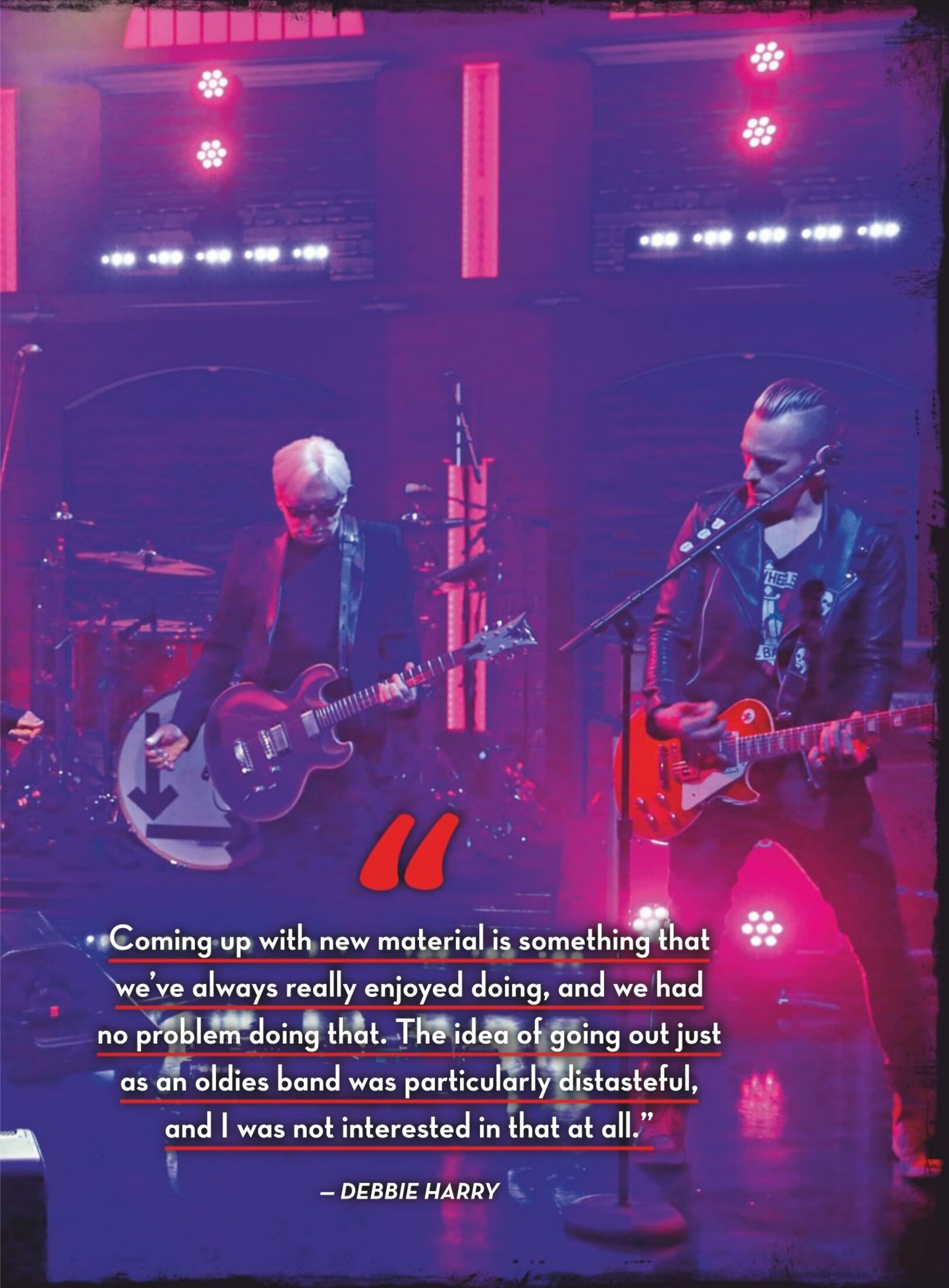
But Harry shut down any possibility of a full-on reunion by taking back the mic and making it clear whose night this was. "Can't you see my band is up there?" Harry told the audience as they got ready to launch into "Call Me," "Heart of Glass" and "Rapture."

She seemed to be telegraphing the chorus to "Just Go Away" from 1978's *Parallel Lines*: "Don't go away mad / Just go away." The fiercely protective frontwoman wasn't going to let anyone ruin Blondie's crowning moment.

At an Amnesty International concert presented by the CBGB Festival in New York on Feb. 5, 2014, Blondie performed at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn along with the likes of Imagine Dragons, Lauryn Hill, The Flaming Lips, members of Pussy Riot and Yoko Ono.

Blondie members for *Pollinator* (2017) included (from left) Matt Katz-Bohen, Burke, Stein, Harry, Foxx and Tommy Kessler. The album was also bolstered by some impressive songwriters, including Sia for the track "Best Day Ever." As Harry told *Billboard*, "Any association with Sia is a complete honor. We asked her for a song because we were such big fans of 'Titanium.'"

Swinging through the TV performance circuit, Blondie performed "Long Time" from their then-new album, *Pollinator*, on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* on Sept. 21, 2017.



> "Coming up with new material is something that we've always really enjoyed doing, and we had no problem doing that. The idea of going out just as an oldies band was particularly distasteful, and I was not interested in that at all."
>
> *— DEBBIE HARRY*

Harry (here at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California in April 2023) told *Esquire* in August 2022 that she is not one to reminisce much. Even so, "It always improves my outlook when I listen to that stuff or think about that era, and how fortunate I was to be there and be a part of it."

REVIVED A Vibra

From music festival stages to memoir pages, Blondie continues to inspire

BY ANNIE ZALESKI

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THESE DAYS, COACHELLA is often considered to be a festival for up-and-coming bands with a few legacy acts sprinkled into the lineup for variety. Historically, the reception to these latter groups has ranged from ecstatic to downright indifferent. When Blondie appeared in the Mojave Tent at Coachella 2023, the band fell squarely in to the former category, playing to an excited crowd ready to dance, scream and worship at the altar of the group's punk-pop hits.

Anchored by age-defying drum force Clem Burke and eternally chic Debbie Harry — she sported wraparound black glasses and punkish clothes one weekend, and sleek leather-like shorts and high boots the next— Blondie raced through a satisfying set that started with the frantic "One Way or Another" and ended with the wistful "Dreaming."

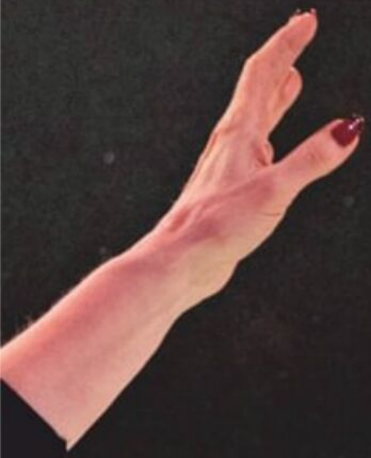
Throughout, the band acknowledged their New York City roots in poignant ways. Footage of *TV Party* — a groundbreaking avant-garde cable TV show co-hosted by Blondie co-founder and guitarist Chris Stein — cycled on screens during "Call Me." On the disco front, Chic's Nile Rodgers made a surprise cameo playing guitar on "Rapture," while "Heart of Glass" segued straight into Donna Summer's seductive dance floor classic "I Feel Love." Blondie's set was triumphant and vital, and the audience was with them every step of the way.

Blondie's self-confidence and effortless cool have only increased over time, which is enormously appealing — as evidenced by Miley Cyrus' faithful 2020 cover of "Heart of Glass." The band is a sterling example of how to remain relevant — and creatively vibrant — decades into a career.

The resurgence can be traced back to the band's 40th anniversary in 2014, when they released *Blondie 4(0) Ever* — a re-recorded collection of their biggest hits — packaged with a new album, *Ghosts of Download*. The latter focused on ▶

On Friday, April 21, 2023, during the second weekend of Coachella, Bad Bunny headlined on the main stage, while Blondie ripped through a 10-song set in the festival's Mojave Tent.

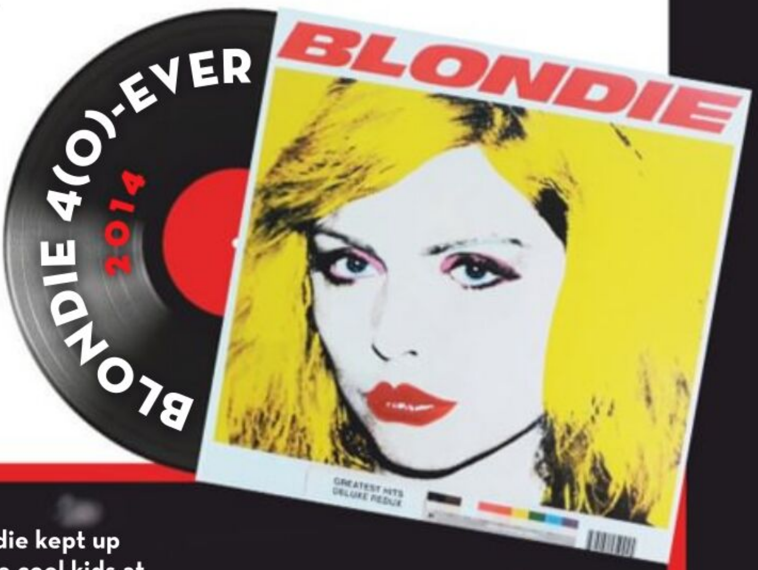
As Harry sang "Call Me" in Blondie's Coachella second-weekend set on April 21, 2023, footage from Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* played on screens behind the band, offering young attendees a glimpse of Blondie and fellow New York contemporaries such as arthouse singer Klaus Nomi at the start of their careers.



sleek electro-pop with nods to disco and reggae, including the propulsive dance floor firestarter “Take It Back,” a collaboration with Gossip’s Beth Ditto (new wave throwback “A Rose By Any Name”) and a surprisingly tender cover of Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Relax.”

These same influences are all prominent on 2017’s *Pollinator*. But as its name implies, the album found Blondie linking up with a variety of artists from different scenes and eras — ex-Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr, rock icon Joan Jett, indie pop wizard Dev Hynes, pop iconoclast Sia and experimental genius Laurie Anderson — for a deeply inspired, glittering distillation of girl-group pop, synth-punk, and reggae. In keeping with the theme, the band promoted the album with tour dates alongside Garbage — a group led by avowed Blondie superfan Shirley Manson — and launched a bee preservation-minded initiative called the BEE Connected Campaign.

Blondie also took control of their own legacy with their long-awaited official boxed set, *Against the Odds: 1974–1982*. The 2022 release compiled studio albums, 36 unreleased tracks and rare archival ephemera — and helped frame the band’s influence in smart and definitive ways, kicking off yet another surge of Blondie adoration. “I loved how she presented herself,” Manson told *The New York Times* about Harry in August 2022. “It wasn’t pandering to the male gaze. She looked smart and sassy, and felt a little dangerous. You forget, because Blondie make it seem so stylish and effortless, how good the songwriting is. ▶



Blondie kept up with the cool kids at England’s Glastonbury Festival on June 27, 2014, by tagging on a bit of the Beastie Boys’ “(You Gotta) Fight For Your Right (To Party!)” after performing fan favorite “Rapture.”

They're the complete, untouchable package."

In addition to appearing at Coachella, Blondie landed high-profile slots at storied British music festivals Glastonbury and the Isle of Wight in 2023. These performances, in turn, came after 2022 tour dates with Johnny Marr and influential U.K. punks the Damned. Harry, meanwhile, also stepped out on her own to collaborate with a bevy of superstar women — country legend Dolly Parton, new wave icons Cyndi Lauper and Belinda Carlisle and Latin music diva Gloria Estefan — for the song "Gonna Be You" from the comedy movie *80 for Brady*. She then teamed up with rockers The Dandy Warhols and DJ Nala for the song "IWNSLY."

In the end, however, it all comes back to Blondie. Even some fairly major lineup changes haven't stopped the band. On recent tours, Sex Pistols' Glen Matlock has played bass, and Stein hasn't been touring while he deals with a heart condition, though Harry has assured fans that he is involved with Blondie's new studio album, which the band has been working on with *Pollinator* producer John Congleton. As always, they're continuing to challenge themselves. "In Blondie's historic way, we're reaching into areas that are outside our norm," Harry told *Classic Pop* magazine in 2022. "This new record? It isn't straight-line pop."

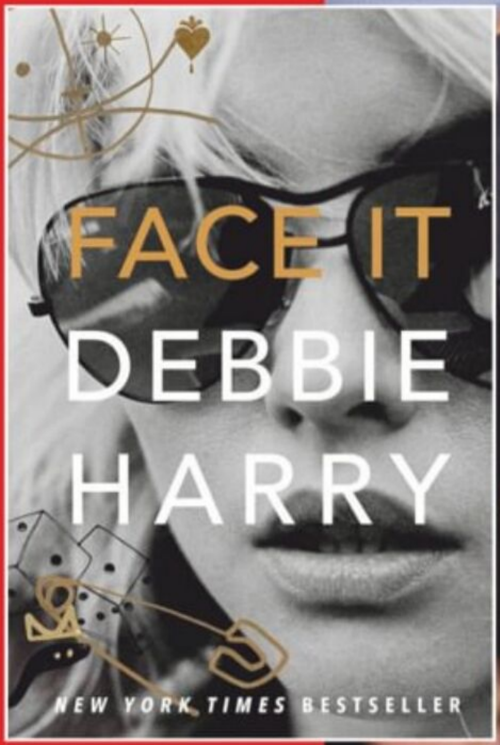
That Blondie is still fired up about pushing music and culture forward is very in character and goes a long way to explain why the band is currently riding such a huge wave of momentum. Of course, resilience and survival are two major driving forces behind Blondie's endurance and success. As the band head into their 50th anniversary in 2024, these qualities continue to serve them well.

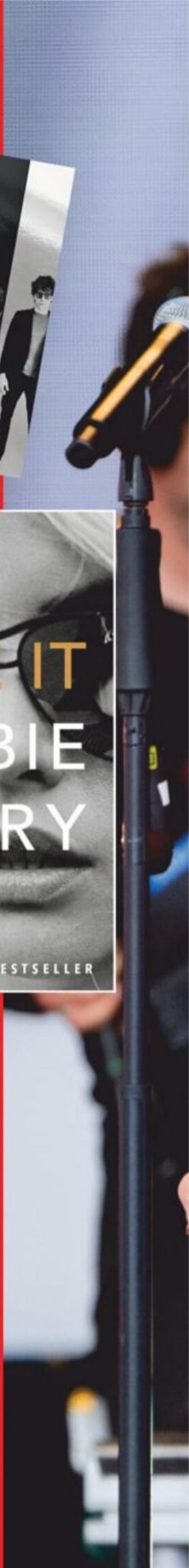
DEBBIE TELLS IT LIKE IT IS

IN 2019, DEBBIE Harry released her candid memoir, *Face It*. Although she has led a fascinating life, she admitted in an interview with *The New York Times* that it took her manager's prodding to finally convince her to write it: "I had no intention of doing it, but he kept nudging."

Working with journalist Sylvie Simmons, Harry opened up about all parts of her life, from the painful (being raped at knifepoint during a robbery) and the provocative (the time David Bowie exposed himself to her) to the bemusing (serving Miles Davis while waitressing at Max's Kansas City) and the beautiful (her enduring relationship with Stein).

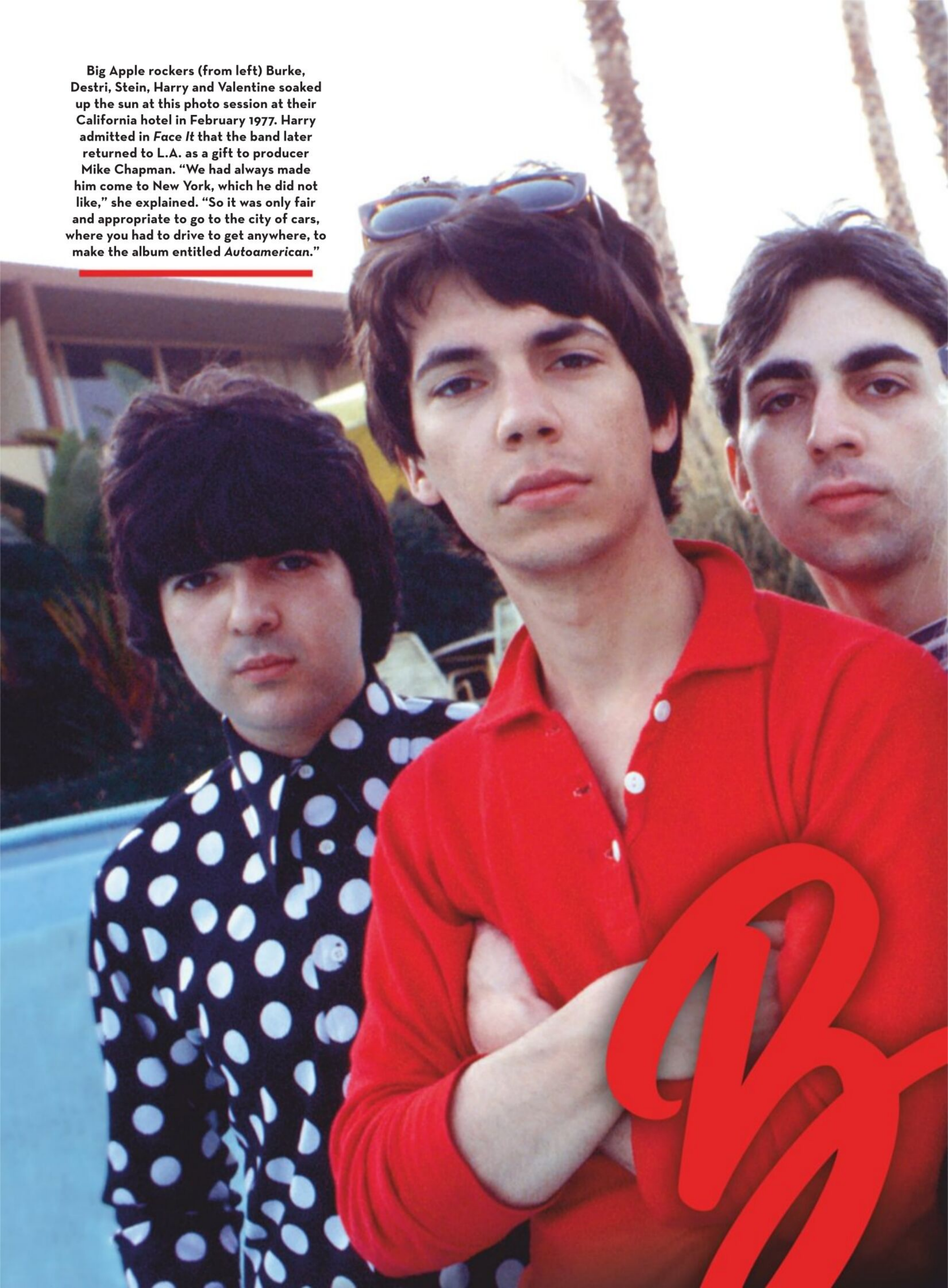
Above all, the book positions Harry as one of the most beguiling and important voices in music. "It's been stewing for a long time," Harry told *The New York Times* about her story, "and it feels good to get it out there."

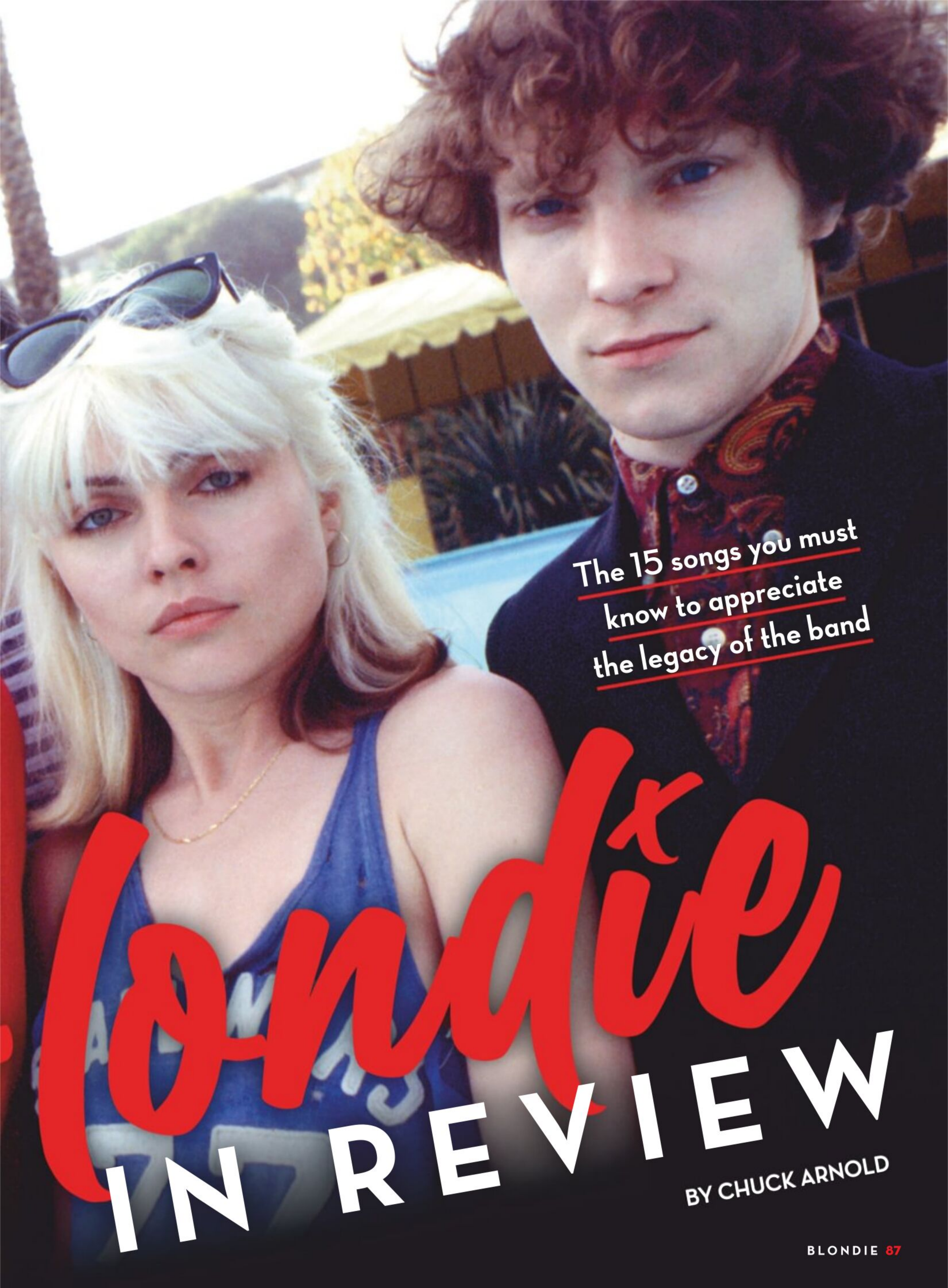




For their latest album and their June 25 performance at the 2023 Glastonbury Festival in Somerset, England, Blondie, with Harry out in front, was backed by former Sex Pistols bassist Glen Matlock. On working with the band, Matlock told music magazine *NME*, "They've got a great body of work and they always seem to push the envelope somehow, slightly. They also have good basslines."

Big Apple rockers (from left) Burke, Destri, Stein, Harry and Valentine soaked up the sun at this photo session at their California hotel in February 1977. Harry admitted in *Face It* that the band later returned to L.A. as a gift to producer Mike Chapman. "We had always made him come to New York, which he did not like," she explained. "So it was only fair and appropriate to go to the city of cars, where you had to drive to get anywhere, to make the album entitled *Autoamerican*."





londie IN REVIEW

The 15 songs you must know to appreciate the legacy of the band

BY CHUCK ARNOLD

15

“X OFFENDER” (1976)

Blondie’s debut single was first titled “Sex Offender,” as bassist Gary Valentine’s original lyrics were about a teen boy who gets his even younger girlfriend pregnant. Then Debbie Harry switched it up to be about a prostitute and her arresting police officer. She oozes ’60s girl group charm in the spoken intro and harmonizes with herself over the punk-pop bounce.

14

“FUN” (2017)

On Blondie’s last studio album, 2017’s *Pollinator*, they collaborated with everyone from Joan Jett and Johnny Marr to Sia and Charli XCX. And it was TV on the Radio’s Dave Sitek who cowrote this disco boogie-down that hit No. 1 on the Billboard dance chart.

13

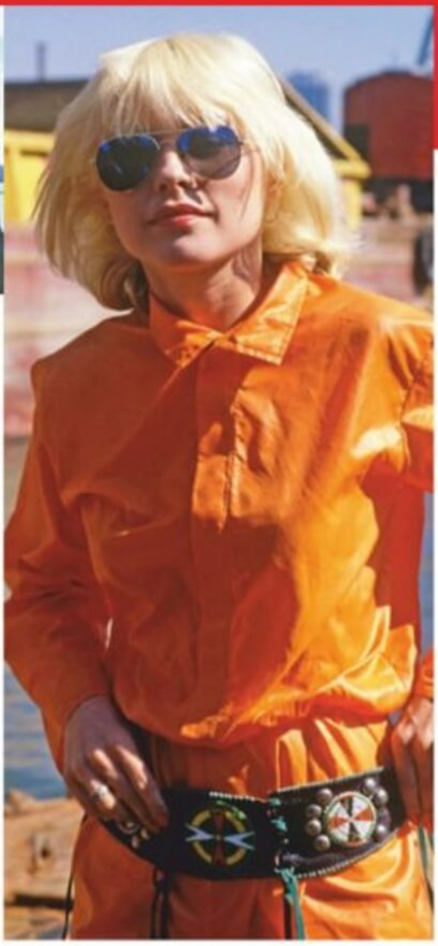
“PICTURE THIS” (1978)

There’s a naked beauty in this midtempo tune from *Parallel Lines* that captures the love between then-coupled Harry and guitarist Chris Stein as she sweetly coos about “watching you shower.”

12

"UNION CITY BLUE" (1979)

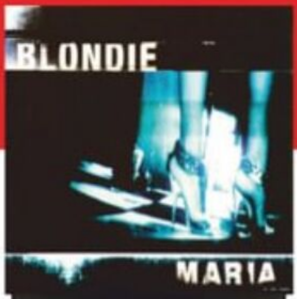
Harry embraced her New Jersey roots on this *Eat to the Beat* single, which was also inspired by her starring role in the 1980 crime drama *Union City*.



11

"SUNDAY GIRL" (1979)

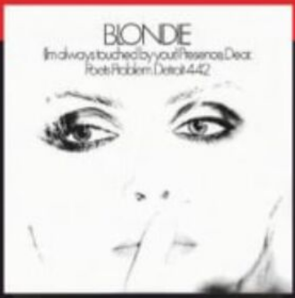
Blondie shedded the new-wave attitude and revealed a soft spot for the feline kind on this lovely, strummy ditty from *Parallel Lines* that Stein wrote for Harry's cat, Sunday Man, after it ran away.



10

"MARIA" (1999)

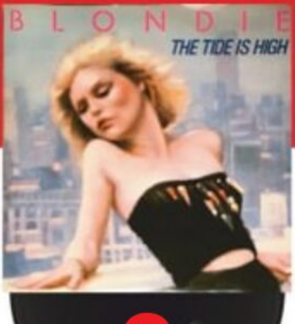
Disbanding after 1982's *The Hunter*, Blondie took 17 long years to reunite on 1999's *No Exit*. And while that album's first single didn't return them to the chart summit in the U.S., it did go No. 1 in the U.K. Written by keyboardist Jimmy Destri, "Maria" is a guitar-chugging rush of dream-girl goals that woos you with its sense of teenage innocence.



9

"(I'M ALWAYS TOUCHED BY YOUR) PRESENCE, DEAR" (1978)

While Valentine split from the group in 1977, his presence was still felt on 1978's *Plastic Letters*. The otherworldly wiles of this song he wrote about a paranormal love connection with his then-girlfriend were so hard to resist that the band still recorded it for their second studio album.



8

"THE TIDE IS HIGH" (1980)

Originally recorded by the Jamaican rocksteady group the Paragons, this left-curve cover was a risky reggae move. But at that point, Blondie was so unstoppable that they rode that wave all the way to the top again with the first single from 1980's *Autoamerican*. Clearly, when a seductive Harry purred, "I'm gonna be your number one," there was no denying her.

7

"ATOMIC" (1980)

The crazy energy of this *Eat to the Beat* single reaches nuclear levels behind the driving drums of Clem Burke. Written by Harry and Blondie's then-keyboardist Jimmy Destri, the track — which puts a spaghetti Western spin on their new-wave style — sounds as if they are blasting into space. And having a blast while doing it.

6

"DREAMING" (1979)

When Harry declares that "Dreamin' is free," you can't help but get lost in the punky reverie right along with her. Stein — who cowrote the first single from 1979's *Eat to the Beat* with Harry — has said that the tune is "pretty much a cop" of "Dancing Queen." Regardless, you don't want to wake up from Blondie's twirling twist on the ABBA anthem.

Blondie (clockwise from left: Burke, Harrison, Destri, Infante, Stein and Harry) kept things colorful at this photo shoot in 1979. Drummer Burke told streaming service Tidal in August 2022 that he had always wanted to join a band with someone like David Bowie, Jim Morrison or Mick Jagger in the front. With Harry, he said, “I would put her on the same level as Bowie, as far as the things she comes up with creatively.”

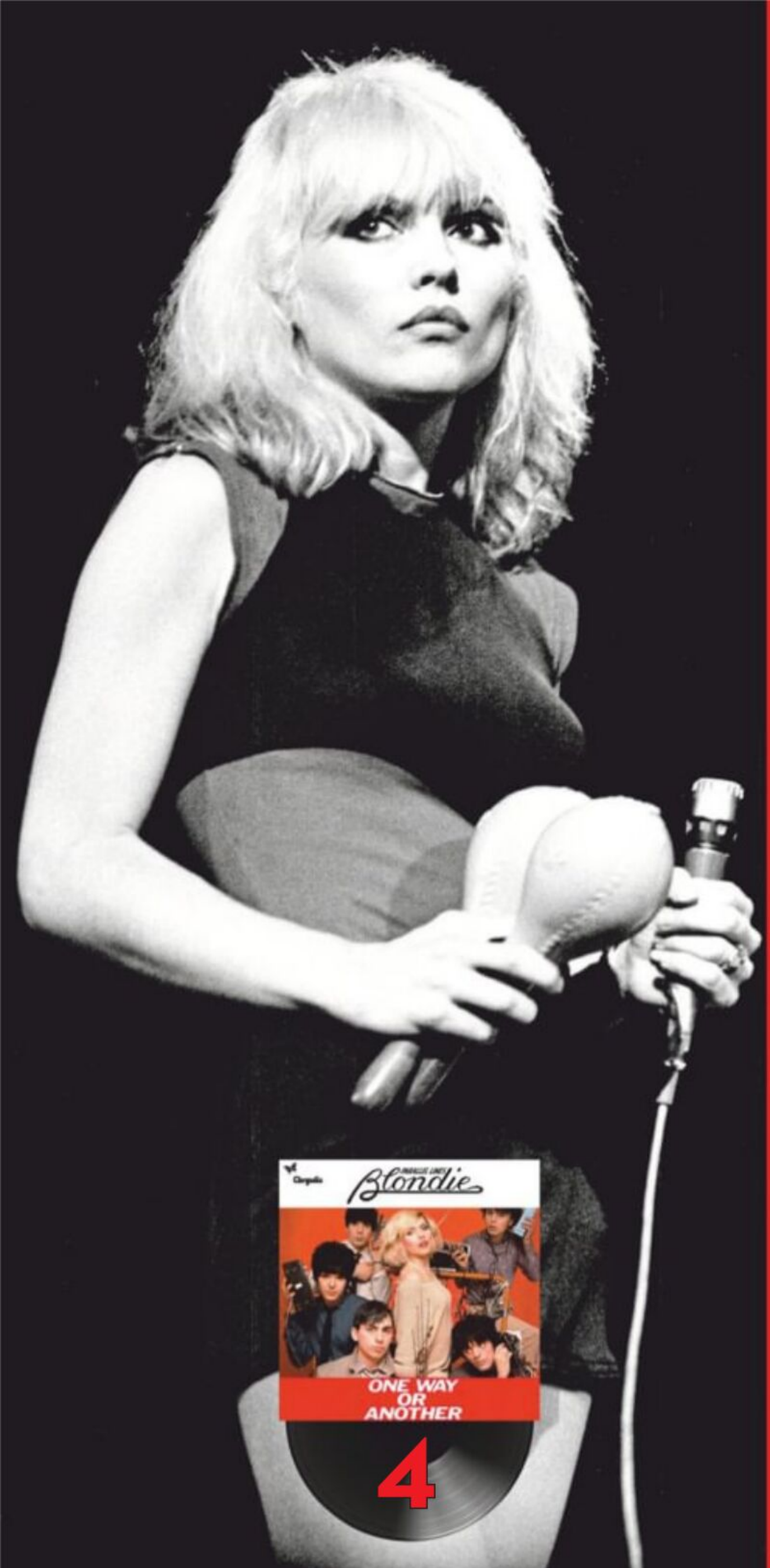
“We had sort of revitalized the concept of songs and dancing in rock. We came along during this big guitar period when everyone sat around and just listened… But I don’t think anybody in the band really expected to [become as big] as we did.”

– DEBBIE HARRY

5

“RIP HER TO SHREDS” (1977)

Taking inspiration from Lou Reed and his Velvet Underground – Blondie’s proto-punk predecessors in the Downtown New York scene – this mean-streets strut from their self-titled debut is a trash-talking takedown that packs a bitch slap. But it’s gossip culture – and the way it can cut you deep – that is the target of Harry’s venom-spitting vocals.



4

"ONE WAY OR ANOTHER"

(1979)

After joining Blondie in 1977, British bassist Nigel Harrison made his biggest cowriting contribution on *Parallel Lines*. For "One Way or Another," he took surf-rock cues from the Ventures, a '60s instrumental band. But it was Harry's own true-life tale of an ex-boyfriend who stalked her after their breakup that added an eerie edge to those razor-sharp guitars and obsessive "get ya"s. Ratcheting up the tempo — and the tension — the song builds to a dizzying delirium that heightens the very real danger.

3

"CALL ME"

(1980)

As with "Heart of Glass" and "Rapture," you could make a strong case for "Call Me" being Blondie's greatest song. Not only was it the band's biggest smash, spending six consecutive weeks at No. 1, but it was the top single of 1980. This dance-rock rave-up served as the heady, hedonistic theme of the box-office hit *American Gigolo*, which starred Richard Gere as a male prostitute, and Harry wrote the lyrics from the perspective of his character. Produced and cowritten by the legendary Giorgio Moroder, it remains a booty-call classic that still works "anytime, anyplace, anywhere, any way."

2

"RAPTURE"

(1981)

The most groundbreaking song in Blondie's catalog — from 1980's *Autoamerican* — is also one of their un-Blondiest ones. But these new-wave icons will be forever remembered as, yes, hip-hop pioneers. While some might think it's not right that a white band should go down in history for having the first No. 1 single to feature rap vocals — with MC Debbie rocking the mic — Harry and Stein earned their connection to hip hop the old fashioned way: by working the New York scene and discovering the genre in its early days through Fab 5 Freddy (the former host of "Yo! MTV Raps" who appears in the track's trailblazing video). But with its intoxicating cocktail of hip hop, new wave and Chic-esque disco, "Rapture" is no novelty. It's six and a half minutes of pure ecstasy.

1

"HEART OF GLASS" (1979)

Every great band has that special song — that one that turns them from good to great. For Blondie, "Heart of Glass" was that song. Although somehow it was only the fourth single from their commercial breakthrough, *Parallel Lines* (1978) — meaning that somehow the record executives believed the covers of "I'm Gonna Love You Too" and "Hanging on the Telephone" were actually better than this revelatory original — it became their first No. 1 hit and the definitive Blondie song. Fittingly written by founding members Debbie Harry and Chris Stein — the band's frontwoman and her guitarist ex — it's new-wave wonderment that 45 years later still makes you feel as if you're floating in the air above the dance floor.

While the members of Blondie (in 1979, from left: Infante, Stein, Harrison, Harry, Destri and Burke) were never shy about their ambition to become a successful band, Stein recently admitted that reminders of their hits decades later can leave him bemused. “I hear ‘Tide is High’ in CVS frequently,” he told Boston radio station WBUR in January 2023. “So that is an odd thing to me, but gratifying.”

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Graffiti artist Shepard Fairey, working with the Little Italy Street Art Project, painted this mural at 316 Bowery in 2017 to commemorate CBGB, the legendary New York City music venue that used to be across the street. After five years, at the end of 2022, Fairey replaced it with a mural of another group of the era, hardcore / heavy metal punk band Bad Brains.

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